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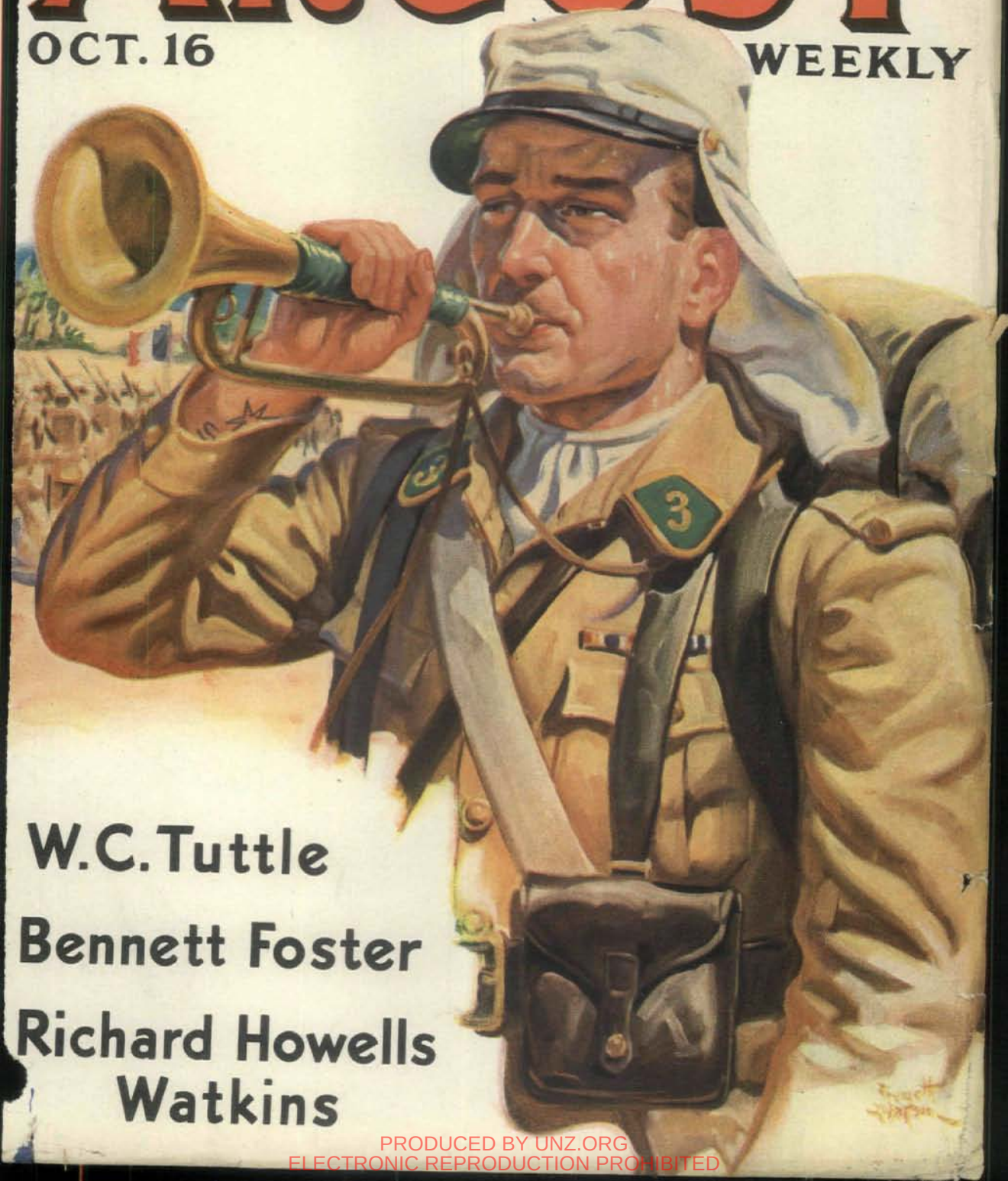

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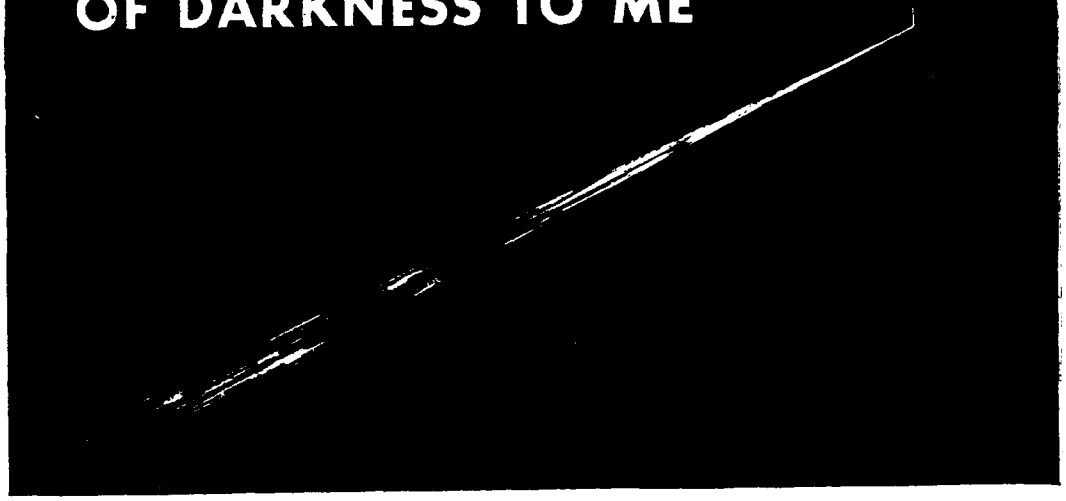

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Action Stories of Every Variety

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The Junkman Calls

By GEORGES SURDEZ

Author of "Long Live the Emperor," "A Hole in the Moon," etc.

A Complete Novelet of the Legion's Fighting Men—and of the Medals That They Die to Win

I

OFFICIAL history has granted the episode a few lines, lost in the pages concerning the Riff Campaign: "Early in the morning of the twenty-ninth, a section of the Foreign Legion reoccupied the village of Tashrift and enabled the column to continue its progress."

Reading these lines, it can be imagined that the operation had been planned, ordered, military. But as a matter of fact, the service of France in Morocco was an excuse rather than a motive. The feverish sweep through the darkness, the fierce rush with bayonets and grenades, the night streaked with darting flames, rent by screams and explosions, could be traced to a sunny morning of the preceding year, when a replacement draft from Algeria marched into the barracks of the Second Foreign Infantry, at Meknes.

Young Gerard was with that detachment, which was forty men in strength. He had been in the French Foreign Legion somewhat less than one year at the time. He was then twenty-three years old, a tall, very powerful man, whose handsome, swarthy face was marred by a sullen expression.

Whatever his reasons for enlisting might have been, he was not poor, for he received sizable money-orders regularly. All guessed, therefore, that his reasons merged into one, and that a woman. After weary months of training, he had obtained Moroccan service, a chance to see action, to fight . . . many believed, to die.

Yet Old Man Kuchler, who stood at the gateway of the Military Camp when the detachment marched in, selected him at once. Kuchler probably was less famous than he thought himself, nevertheless, he was a known character, a survivor of a dead epoch. Campaigns and expeditions, battles and combats, which were merely history to

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the others in the ranks, had been personal experiences for him, had become dearly loved memories.

Kuchler was down on the records as forty-eight. Still, the oldest non-coms seemed to remember him standing thus when a new draft arrived anywhere he might be garrisoned—a tall, spare silhouette, straight, square of shoulders, showing a lean, wrinkled face slashed by the whitish mustache, képi tilted rakishly over one eye, uniform spotlessly clean, leathers shining, decorations gleaming on his chest.

He did not stand so simply from curiosity. He was on his legitimate business, that of a veteran Legionnaire seeking a good prospect. He had something to offer, in his own estimation—many years' experience, a thorough knowledge of the ropes that actuate officers and non-coms in the Corps. And he wanted something in exchange, liquid to be poured down his throat, anything fluid and alcoholic, from ordinary red wine to costly cognac.

Gerard walked by him, dressed from

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head to feet exactly as were his thirty-nine comrades, for army regulations permit little fancy. But Kuchler had not been nicknamed the X-Ray Eye for nothing. He selected Gerard at once. His particular talent for scenting money on a recruit was so well established that, as Kuchler watched the newcomers, other Legionnaires watched Kuchler. When they saw his eyes kindle as he looked upon Gerard, they never doubted his choice.

SOME started to work before Kuchler—who was a deliberate, unhurried craftsman—paid visible attention to Gerard. The young man had barely hoisted his pack to the plank above the cot assigned him when two or three soldiers concentrated on him.

"Butt to spare, fellow? Thanks. What's your name?"

"Arnold Gerard."

"Frenchman, aren't you?"

Gerard didn't answer, except for a sudden frown.

"All right, all right. Don't get sore. What are you doing tonight? We know some fine spots where—"

"Not interested. Thanks."

Those who had come with Gerard from Algeria warned off the local lads. Gerard was free with cigarettes, and occasionally would lend a small sum, but he wished to be left alone. He drank, but he drank alone; and he had a bad temper.

"Kuchler'll chisel him, you'll see."

"We'd bet against it. He's mopey, but not dumb."

Wide interest centered upon the two. One, Gerard, was utterly unaware of the game being played, or of its rules. Kuchler sensed money and drinks, and used his own system to obtain them. For a week, the Legionnaires watched him stalk Gerard. And one fine afternoon, there they were, Kuchler and Gerard, seated together on the young Legionnaire's cot.

"See, young fellow, it's all in knowing how." Kuchler was instructing the other in the proper winding of the bandages which take the place of socks in the Legion. "I could have you a sergeant within a year. You're officer material, that's what, officer material. You have the stuff. Me? No education to start, a congenital thirst, and no ambition. I was a corporal once—"

"Ah?" For the first time, Legionnaires saw a smile on Gerard's features, the flitting ghost of a smile. "You were a corporal once, and you were reduced."

"Sure. What's so funny about it?"

"Nothing that concerns you, Old Man." Gerard grew sullen again. "A literary reminiscence. But you see, Kuchler, I am like you. No ambition. Not even ambition to help others to become sergeants."

"Let's talk that over. Come out tonight with me and—"

"Thanks. No."

"Snap out of it, lad, I'll show—"

Gerard stared at him, nodded understanding. He rose, lifted the veteran by the arm. Then he produced his wallet, picked out a ten-franc note, creased it neatly twice, and casually offered it with the tips of his fingers.

"Kuchler, we make a bargain. Take this, get soused, and leave me alone."

Ten francs was a sum for a Legionnaire. It must be recalled that Kuchler, who had enlisted in the days when there was no bonus, was a man who had contracted to serve five whole years for ninety francs, eighteen dollars at the current exchange. For a moment, he looked at the bill, then became aware of Gerard's scorn. His yellowish skin flushed red.

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Tireless on the march, very strong for his years, Kuchler nevertheless could not be called an athlete. At the showers, his long, bony body, his stork-like legs, aroused general mirth. But his skinny arm lunged out, his knuckles struck Gerard full on the mouth.

THE powerful young fellow staggered, straightened, his fists bunching. The others rushed to separate them. The fight would have been too uneven, for the truculent old chap could not give away twenty-five years and forty pounds.

"Easy, Kuchler. He'll knock your block off!"

"Let me go! I'm not afraid of him —what does he think I am, his flunkey? A tip—go and get soused—"

"I'll fight him for you, Kuchler—"

"You'll fight him for me? What the —I'm not—"

Gerard watched Kuchler's furious, distorted face, as if he were puzzled. His own face relaxed. So there was pride in this old fellow? It was not only drink he sought? Absent-mindedly, he wiped the trickling blood from his chin, stared at the smeared tips of his massive fingers. His glance softened.

"There'll be no fight," he stated. "Kuchler, I apologize. I misunderstood you." He stepped forward, hand outstretched. "If your invitation still goes, we go out tonight."

Kuchler laughed, shook off restraining hands. He grasped the hand offered to him. "No grudge, kid. You're on."

That was the start of the friendship between the silent youngster and the gay veteran. It strengthened with the passing weeks. There were skeptics, of course, who insisted that Kuchler was an old fox, and had conducted the whole scene with a purpose, from beginning to end.

He cultivated the Legion spirit in Gerard, who became a Legionnaire and not merely a man wearing the uniform of the Corps. Whatever preyed on the young fellow's mind seemed to give him increased moments of peace. And there was a memorable night, in the Meknes Reserved Quarter, when his fine baritone chimed into a chorus. From then on, he laughed, played cards, drank, quarreled and fought, like a normal soldier.

Kuchler resembled a proud father guiding a favorite son in a chosen profession. On his side, his wildest dreams were fulfilled—his sloping throat was never dry, his tobacco pouch was always stuffed. Gerard's purse was his purse.

With the "pre-war Legionnaire" as a guiding spirit, there were epic sprees on pay-nights, sprees that became legendary in Meknes. If Kuchler indeed meant to make a sergeant of Gerard, his methods were odd. For he got him into rows with civilians, scrapes with the police, and their outings ordinarily ended in cells. Fortunately for both, their relationship was known, and the clemency shown Kuchler by old-time officers who had reached the heights, extended to his pupil.

"Sweep out the cells," Kuchler would address the sergeant at the gate, "the kid got a money order this morning, and we'll do some massive celebrating."

The old-timer loved to show off his friend's generosity, invite old comrades judged worthy of the honor. As Legionnaires are always thirsty, their party would increase in numbers as the evening progressed. And, suddenly, Gerard's pockets would be empty.

"Don't worry, Kid," Kuchler would say. "I'll hock my junk."

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KUCHLER'S "junk" meant his decorations. He was well known, and there was no need to seek a professional money-lender. Barkeepers and matrons would accept one of his badges of honor as a guarantee for ultimate payment. He had done this so often that there was a scale of prices.

For instance, the Cross of the Legion of Honor, a rare decoration for a private, which had been "personally pinned by Gouraud at the Dardanelles," fetched a credit of thirty francs. The showy plaque of the Dragon of Annam brought forty, the Nisham Allouit, of Morocco, twenty-five francs.

The War Cross, the Colonial Cross, the campaign medals, mostly bronze or plated stuff, with small intrinsic value, would go in a lump for forty francs. At first, Gerard protested.

"You shouldn't do that, Kuchler. You'll lose them, some day, and you'll be sorry."

Which gave Kuchler his chance to make a speech.

"That's junk. That's all they're really good for, hocking for a little booze. The Legion of Honor? What fat industrialist lacks it? They give it to actresses and worse. I killed six Turks for mine, and took two bullets in the guts. But if I had been a pretty singer instead of a lousy Legionnaire, all I'd have needed was to wink at a cabinet minister. And at so much a wink, at that!"

And the much-sought disks and crosses, enameled and gold, silver and bronze, the Levant Medal with Cedar Ornament, the Military Medal won before the Great War, would go into cigar boxes beneath dirty counters, into old tin chests, into the drawer of a modern cash-register. Glory for sale—

They were transformed into bottles of cognac, anisette and wine, into steins of foaming beer, into lengths of salami and bologna into loaves of bread and cloves of garlic, into the coarse and lusty pleasures of professional soldiers

Before Gerard's time, other admiring young fellows had redeemed those decorations for him. When they had failed, some officer or other, who had known Kuchler for many years, would supply the funds. In a way, it was a graft, a racket, which the old man plied without false shame. Because he could not be expected to redeem them on his own pay, which was small enough at best.

Between sprees, Gerard was learning his trade. And it was a proud day when he received the chevron of first-class Legionnaire. Kuchler invited six friends, and the party started out with a total of nine hundred francs, most of which sum was contributed by Gerard. During the evening, the young fellow had a brilliant idea. He had Kuchler pledge his decorations to him!

"You're going to hock them anyway —let me take care of them—"

"Sure, Gerard," another Legionnaire put in. "You'll only pay for them once, that way." And Kuchler laughed, ordered more drink.

There was a Russian in the party. Consequently, around ten o'clock, the Legionnaires were engaged in innocent recreation, the systematic smashing of glasses and dishes against the mirrors of the establishment. The owner screamed, and the police arrived, represented at first by a brace of husky Moroccans, turbaned like Hindus, who sought to arrest Kuchler and Gerard as the ring-leaders.

The two Moroccans escaped half-naked, came back with reinforcements, native and French. As such scraps went, it was a very pretty mêlée, car-

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ried out cleanly, without spitefulness. The police wisely refrained from using side-arms, which would have made it ethical for the Legionnaires to employ chair, table, bottle and boot.

Eyes were puffed, lips gashed.

But a military patrol was called for, and the Legionnaires found themselves outnumbered, in danger of suffering the humiliation of being carried bodily to a civic prison. So, at Kuchler's call, they bunched and battered their way to the street, spilling cops right and left as they advanced.

Other Legionnaires saw them, came on the run. There was a memorable combat in the narrow street, complete and classic, with women hanging out of windows to scream, slop-buckets cascading at random over the swirling mass of men. More help arrived for the police. No one knew quite what the fight was about by that time, but it was thoroughly enjoyable.

"We'll be caught. Let's go—" Kuchler called.

There followed a running engagement, out of the Reserved Quarter, onto Bab el Baroud, the Gate of Powder, and up the long hill toward the camp, a series of gallant sprints and skirmishes. The police pursuit ended when the proximity of the barracks increased the number of Legionnaires, men who came in answer to the famous rallying call:

"A nous, la légion!"

Twenty yards from the gateway, the fugitives paused for breath. And it was then that Gerard discovered his disaster. It was not that his left eye was swollen, that one ear bled and the other was the size of a melon. But he had lost his képi—and that article, like all items of equipment, bore his matricular number and would identify him absolutely.

"That's bad," Kuchler opined. "We socked some of them pretty hard, and they're plenty sore. Look, I can get away with it better than you, being an old soldier. You take my képi!"

"Wouldn't do me any good, they've got mine with my number."

"We'll go back and get it—" Kuchler decided.

For a moment, this was approved. Until Gerard pointed out that the police probably had taken the képi to the station and that to undertake to storm Police Headquarters was a bit too much.

The colonel prevented Gerard's arrest by the gendarmes, but compromised by inflicting fifteen days in prison upon him, for loss of equipment. Naturally, the single chevron of first-class private was withdrawn.

II

WHILE Gerard was in a cell, wearing his white-drill garments for pajamas and sleeping on a hard plank, Kuchler boasted about him until men were tired of listening. "A real Legionnaire, that one. Always thirsty, always ready for a scrap! When he's had his fun as a private, watch him climb—an officer, that's what he'll be, an officer!"

"Looks like it, don't it?" a doubtful listener objected. "He's had eighty days' clink in a year. And he's been reduced to second-class, hasn't he?"

"What of it? Give him time. He's got to forget his troubles. What he went through would make an ordinary guy crazy for life!"

That was the first inkling anyone received that Gerard had confided his real story to his friend. Putting on a Legion uniform does not kill a man's curiosity. Some kind comrades decided

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it was worth the investment of getting Kuchler babbling drunk to have a peep into another man's past.

Soaked so completely that anisette might have been wrung from his eyebrows, Kuchler was easily prompted. He probably believed he was flattering his young friend.

As stories are rated in the Legion, it was not much of a story. Gerard, whose real name Kuchler would not reveal, was the only son of prosperous parents. After his service in the army, he had entered his father's business. And fallen in love with one of the secretaries. For more than a year, his mother, his father, his uncles and aunts, had begged him not to throw himself away. They had nothing to say against the girl, except that her father was a trolley-car conductor! But anyone familiar with the complicated social fences of the European middle-class knew what that meant.

And there was a girl picked out, with a dot that would enlarge the business. Gerard had been badgered into postponing a marriage, which he could not enter into until he was twenty-five without parental consent. At last, he had spoken to his girl, suggesting that they might call it off.

She had taken the break very well indeed. Smiled, said she understood. Unfortunately, her body had been fished out of a nearby river, three days later.

Gerard had loved her sincerely. And the loss, the tragedy, was made harder to bear because many considered him a self-centered monster, and charitably believed that the real facts had been hushed up. He had not wished to shock his family by imitating his sweetheart, but he had decided that his life would be better ended.

The Legionnaires who heard Kuchler sympathized with Gerard. They knew by experience, most of them, the helplessness and despair that grip a man before an accomplished fact.

"Take him a while to forget," they admitted.

Gerard returned to the ranks after his discharge from prison. No one mentioned the matter to him. And when his next money order arrived, Kuchler suggested another party.

THE young Legionnaire seemed gay, contrasted with his former moody behavior. He fed bronze coins to the mechanical piano, sang the chorus of every song, danced with the paid entertainers. As the evening progressed, he held a mock auction, picking up Kuchler's decorations "at bargain rates." This had become a sort of ritual with the pair. And their companions saw nothing very shocking in it.

As was normal, it was a woman who started the trouble. She judged that Gerard was not paying enough attention to her, because he preferred talking to his friends to dancing with her. She coaxed him a while, patted his hair.

"Go on, Carmen, take a walk," he said at last.

She turned away, muttering under her breath. But Gerard had very sharp ears.

For an instant, he sat as if frozen. His cheeks turned greenish, in the extreme pallor of tanned men. Without rising his hand darted out, his fingers locked about the Spanish girl's wrist. She threw herself back, started to scold angrily. Then she met his glance and grew frightened, mute.

"What was that?" Gerard asked.

"What?"

"What you said—"

"Nothing."

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"Say it again—say it again—" he insisted.

His fingers had tightened on her arm. The girl screamed, and a burly civilian rose from a table in the corner. One of the Legionnaires fastened his eye on him, and he sank back.

"Say it again—"

"Let me go—please let me go—"

"I'll break your wrist—" Gerard said calmly.

"I said I wouldn't drown myself over you—let me go, now—"

"In a moment. Why did you say it?"

"I don't know—let go—let go—"

"Why?"

"You know why—let go—you know why!"

Gerard released her. His face was grinning, sinister as a naked skull.

"I know why. Here's fifty francs for you. Forgive me."

"That's all right, Arnold—"

"Now, go—" Gerard's fists were resting on the table. His eyes burned into the faces of his comrades. "You're a gang of bums, moochers, chiselers. I have always known it, really. You're my pals, my good little friends, as long as my dough holds out. That's for the lot of you—"

He rose and faced Kuchler. And the old soldier, who had never shown fear, eased out of his chair, backed away, mumbling excuses. Perhaps he was not afraid of Gerard, only shocked and grieved by what his careless talk had done to the young man.

One of the Legionnaires, a large fellow who had never liked Gerard very much, saw his chance. He was standing, his face menacing, a challenge in the set of his massive head.

"Lay off the old guy, mug!"

Gerard barely glanced at him. His right arm swept up, his fist crashed against the man's cheek, near the temple. The poor fellow sagged over the table, head hanging one way, legs the other.

"Come here, Kuchler," Gerard invited.

The old soldier's hobnailed boots scraped the boards audibly. His neck throbbed visibly.

"Listen, kid, listen—"

"You were drunk and you talked. I'm not surprised," Gerard told him. "I don't know whether I'm sore at you or at myself. I should have remembered that you were not a man, just a drunken old gossip. I'm in the Legion now, and supposed to have no more feeling than a dog. It's funny that I should be hurt to hear—about somebody else from that girl, in a dump like this. That's where you live, that's where I live. Legionnaires, eh?"

"I didn't mean—"

"I bought your friendship, not your silence. That's correct?" Gerard shrugged, threw his money in a crumpled handful of bills on the table. "Don't let me interrupt your enjoyment, my excellent comrades. I'm leaving the only part of me that you really want."

"Don't carry it too far, Gerard," another Legionnaire said.

"Who'll stop me? You?" Gerard laughed. "You're a fine guy, too. I've kept you pickled for weeks. You and your cross, you're a lovely soldier! Pretty, very pretty—" He seemed to whip himself with the insults he poured on the others. "Which makes me think. Here's your junk, Kuchler!"

He took the decorations from his capote pocket, a bundle in a handkerchief, tossed it at the old Legionnaire's feet.

"You shouldn't have done it," Kuchler said.

"Why not? When guys like you get

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them, they're junk, as you say." He started to laugh once more. "Military crime: Insults to decorations! Selling them is all right, though—"

Kuchler picked up the little bundle.

"I'll owe you for them," he stated. And he restrained the others with a gesture. "Leave him alone. He's nuts. Don't know what it's all about, he doesn't!"

"Wait until he gets some of his own," another suggested.

"If you got some," Gerard declared, "it must be easy. I say it's bunk, all of it, the Legion, friends, crosses." He indicated Kuchler with his finger.

"If you don't believe me, look what it's made of him. *It* must have been a man, once!"

He challenged them a last time with his glance. When they did not move, he strode out of the place. Kuchler was sorting the glittering medals with his wrinkled fingers, patting them, as a miser handles gold. And the others automatically gathered the scattered bills, and avoided looking at him, because there were tears on his cheeks.

Then amusement followed tragedy, as always.

The Legionnaire who had been knocked out recovered his senses, lurched to his feet, sought Gerard with his eyes. And the others, watching his truculence, listening to his oaths, laughed until their sides ached.

III

WHEN the Battalion was ordered to the Riff Front, months later, Gerard was placed on the promotion list, as a corporal. This rise was justified, for he had not been drunk once since breaking with Kuchler and his crowd. He had existed as alone in the crowded barracks.

He asked to see the captain, protested against his promotion. Henri-Louis Briffon, professional officer, once well known in all the gambling circles of Europe, was a thorough Legionnaire. At forty, he was still one of the handsomest men in the service, and his private life swarmed with delectable scandals.

"You wish to surrender your chevrons, Corporal?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Impossible." The officer polished the nails of his right hand against his left palm. "I appointed you. Am I to understand that you question my judgment?"

"In this case, yes, Captain."

"Why?"

"Because I came to the Legion with a certain purpose. That purpose I shall not be free to seek if I am responsible for others, even in such a humble capacity."

Briffon eyed him coldly.

"There is nothing humble about being a corporal of the Legion—" he corrected. "And don't be afraid of words, corporal. You mean that you came here to seek death. Why not say so? It's nothing to be ashamed of. But permit me to reassure you"—his tone became bitingly ironical—"no Legionnare will complain of the extra risk he will run by being under your orders. In any event, it cannot matter—if your men live, there'll be no reason to kick. If they're killed, they won't have a word to say. You'll come as a corporal, or remain here."

BY TRUCKS and afoot, the Battalion was hurried to the front. And within thirty-six hours of leaving Meknes, it was in contact with the enemy, at the time unbroken, confident, fired to savage efforts by its leaders.

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If Gerard was not killed during those first days, it was not his fault. Although he had no ambition, did not long for promotion, he could not conceal the fact that he was a chief by instinct and taste, a born leader. He possessed intelligence, nerve and that mysterious magnetism which brings men's eyes toward certain persons in moments of great danger.

"Still alive, Corporal?" Captain Briffon would ask him. "Don't grow discouraged. This campaign will last a few months."

Whether intentionally or otherwise, the company commander never mentioned Gerard for a decoration, although other men were cited for doing much less than he. Kuchler, for instance, received a divisional citation for bringing in a brace of wounded men. His passion as a collector of medals seemed at a white heat, and many claimed that he actually hoped he would be wounded. For it would be his fourth wound on Moroccan soil, and he would receive that coveted, rarely awarded badge, the Order of Sheriffian Merit.

Then the Battalion attacked with the powerful column sent toward the Jebel Manarf. This time, it was opposed by warriors worthy of its best, coastal tribes supported by Riffi regulars. During the sharp combat that led to the taking of the crest on which stood the little village of Tashrift, Gerard again distinguished himself.

The senior-sergeant commanding his section, a large, massive German, was struck in the jaw by a Mauser missile. Gifted with great phyical endurance, possessed of a blind, elephantine courage, the fellow would not drop, although senseless from the shock. The impact slewed him about, he staggered drunkenly.

Mad with the pain from his shattered bones, blood spurting from a ghastly wound, his rage and his lust for immediate retaliation obsessed him. The signal had been given for the advancing men to take cover, but his voice rose in an incoherent shout, he gestured for his men to keep on.

That meant an insane rush across four hundred yards of nude slope, with the entire fire of the enemy concentrated upon less than forty men. Seconds counted.

Gerard reacted to his training. Admittedly, he cared nothing for his own life. But continuing the rush would soon mean the deaths of at least a dozen men, useless, stupid deaths. Legionnaires being what they were, they would follow the sergeant as long as he was on his feet. Gerard took the chance of being shot by a nervous noncom for breaking formation, raced toward the sergeant.

For a brief moment, there was a bewildering spectacle, as the two wrestled in the open. Then the wounded giant was tripped and fell to the ground. Gerard scrambled to his knees, held up his hand:

"Stop, you bunch of fools! Halt!"

His gesture, his shout, penetrated to their excited brains, made them realize the situation. The line dropped to cover. Just in time, for the natives had brought a light machine-gun to bear on the section, and the streams of lead swung back and forth like the hissing blade of a scythe.

FIFTEEN minutes later, when the battalion's objective had been attained, Captain Briffon summoned Corporal Gerard. "You'll act as sergeant for your section. You'll be confirmed in the grade by official decision later."

"I cannot supersede the other sergeants, Captain."

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Briffon, who was covered with dust and rather breathless, smiled briefly. "We're a bit short of sergeants, you know."

Gerard looked around, and scowled nervously. The Battalion was thinned considerably. The charge up hill had been more murderous than he had thought. The Riffi probably had detailed marksmen to pick off men wearing stripes and chevrons, for very few officers were left while the non-coms had lost fifty percent.

Briffon pointed out a tiny square on the map, lifted his hand to indicate a small group of houses on the right of their line.

"That's Tashrift. Take your section and occupy some of those hovels. Hold on as long as you can." The officer grinned. "Unless I am much mistaken, the beggars across the way will slam over one of those sweet counter-attacks they can produce when they're really interested. It's a key position, as they say. Sweeps this slope." Briffon offered his hand. "Good luck, Sergeant—whichever way you choose to find luck."

Gerard gathered the remnants of the combat groups. They counted less than twenty-five men. He explained their mission. They would occupy the houses on the north, and be somewhat ahead of the French line, jutting out like the prow of a ship. That meant that the counter-attack would beat their flanks as well as the front.

They walked across the slope, saluted by long-range scattered shots. When they reached the hamlet, they saw that it had been rather badly knocked about by artillery fire. A few bodies were among the ruins.

"Fine-looking eggs," one of the Legionnaires remarked.

He was right. They had been tall, brawny warriors, deep of chest, lean of hips. If the hordes massing for the counter-attack were made up of the same breed, there was much to worry about.

Holes were knocked for loopholes in the crumbling walls. The automatic rifles were placed in convenient locations. The gunners readjusted their mechanisms, fired a few tentative shots, while the purveyors of the gun crews placed their ammunition within easy reach. That accomplished, there was not much more to do. They sat down to wait; cigarettes were lighted.

Kuchler, leaner and grayer than ever, came toward Gerard.

"Well, kid, you're on your way," he said. "Sergeant already."

"Get back to your post," Gerard ordered.

"I thought this would have knocked that nonsense out of your head," Kuchler said. "Why not let bygones be bygones?"

"Get back where you belong, Legionnaire."

Kuchler grinned. He uncorked his canteen, took a long pull at the neck. He smacked his lips.

"To hell with you. You're just a crybaby." He laughed. "Sure, I'm soused But drunk or sober, I'm a better soldier than you are—Sergeant or not, you can—" Kuchler made himself very clear. "So, here you are, working for chevrons, and for junk—" He touched his decorations. "For these, eh, stupid?"

Gerard stepped toward him, the old fellow fell back, bringing up his rifle.

"Come on, Kid. This ain't a café! I've been places where you'd never have gone, and come back alive. Come on, and I'll scatter your bowels with this sticker—"

"Seargeant," the man on watch called out. "Somebody's coming—" and

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as Gerard, dropping the foolish quarrel, reached his side, he pointed. "Look at them."

SOME fifty-odd Senegalese *Tirailleurs,* many carrying picks and shovels, were coming from the right. They were led by a lieutenant, a tall, slender young man whose white face loomed like a balloon against the grinning black masks.

"Who's in charge?" the European asked.

"I am, Lieutenant. Acting-Sergeant Gerard, Foreign Legion."

"Lieutenant Hanoteau, Fifth Senegalese. You'll take your men out of here. This belongs to us." Hanoteau showed Gerard a map, crisscrossed with blue and red pencil markings. "As you see."

"My captain ordered me here—"

"Yes, yes. You Legionnaires hog everything." Hanoteau smiled to take the sting from his words. "I'll give you a written order—"

Kuchler, standing nearby, protested. "You've got no orders to give us, Baby."

Heanoteau, who seemed even younger seen close to, twenty at the most, looked at Kuchler for a moment, smiled. "Is that a sample of the famous Legion discipline, Sergeant? My compliments." He ignored Kuchler, scribbled a note. "Hand this to your captain. That will clear your responsibility."

Gerard hesitated. He did not know his rights, did not know if he should obey an officer of another corps in the field. Logically, he should. But from the expression on his men's faces, he was expected to protest. However, what reason could he evoke? And there might be time to return if Captain Briffon insisted.

Within ten minutes, he handed his chief the note from Hanoteau, which explained his quick return to the Battalion. Briffon appeared annoyed.

"You should have sent a runner. However—what's done is done. That chap is in possession, and seems justified according to the sketch map. You can take the right of the line. I'd feel much better if that place was held by our own men." Briffon shrugged. "All this to get his outfit credit for taking and holding the dump. It's always the same—they'll chisel the Legion whenever they can."

THE balance of that day passed without effective action. The Riffi had field pieces, which they had taken from the Spaniards, and at long intervals one of these would hurl over poorly directed, fumbling shots, which would bring the seventy-five millimeters into their rhythmic, drumming fire. The Legionnaires sweltered in the position they had taken, broiled by the sun, choked by the assorted stinks.

Twilight came. There was a lull in the firing as the sad chanting of the evening prayer rose in the mauve glow of the sunset, from both sides of the lines, for there were many Moslems with the French Forces. From their shallow trench, Gerard and his Legionnaires saw the protrudtng, bastionlike angle of the hamlet merge into the gathering darkness.

Captain Briffon made his first rounds of the night.

"I've had confirmation that the village is included in the Senegalese's sector," he said. "It would have been better to have us in there, as they'll find out. But I am informed that I am wrong, that there will be no attempt to counter-attack. If there is one, orders are to hold, each section sticking to its assigned spot. You'll have a job, over

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here, as they'll flank you by passing in the village."

"The Senegalese may hold it, Captain," Gerard suggested. "I understood they were excellent fighters—"

"Granted. At the right time and place. But this is Morocco—and night. Atavism will make them less efficient. The Moors raided Black Africa for slaves over several centuries, and negroes know it subconsciously."

Briffon clasped Gerard's shoulder in a friendly gesture, left. The young sergeant was growing to like him. The captain was a kindly man—for instance instead of repeating orders, he had given him an intelligent explanation. He had sensed, evidently, that Gerard was well educated.

Half of the men were allowed to seek rest, the others remained on watch. The wind had shifted, blew from the north, sharp and chilly. The upper sky was clear, dusted with stars; but close to the ground the darkness was opaque as ink. Occasionally, the flickering flashes of rifle fire streaked the obscurity, detonations rolled and echoed in the hills. From the rear came the distant throbbing of motors, trucks hauling up supplies, some said heavy artillery as well.

For information and rumor, the true and the false, drifted along the waiting line. Who had been killed, who had been wounded, what would be attempted in the morning. But this whispering ended at the last of Gerard's groups, for the nearest Senegalese outpost was at least sixty yards to the right, in the village.

Was this gap dangerous? Gerard wondered whether he should not ask for instructions. He decided to wait until the captain or another officer came on inspection. He huddled against the side of the trench, and waited.

"Smart guy. Conceited hog!"

He started. There was no mistaking that voice. It was Kuchler, and Kuchler was drunk! There was something to this old Legionnaire stuff after all—Kuchler's canteen appeared to hold a barrel of wine!

"Section commander, is he? He can bloody well command—!"

"Shut up, Kuchler," a Legionnaire growled. "He can hear you."

"So what? Pull! That's what, pull! His mamma writes to the old man"—Kuchler's tones rose in drunken derision—" 'Take care of my darling son, Captain dear! He's no ordinary Legionnaire like the rest, you know. He enlisted at eighteen, came out a sergeant, with a commission in the reserves. So, Captain dear, you must make him an officer quick, because he don't like stew for breakfast!' "

IN ANOTHER mood, Gerard would have laughed with the rest of the listeners. But he was furious, because more of his personal life had leaked out. He groped his way toward the Legionnaire.

"Where did you hear that?"

"The secretary saw the letters. As if you didn't know."

Gerard had not known. But it must be the truth—his mother did not understand the difference between the home service in France and the Foreign Legion. Somehow, this altered matters. Briffon had not selected him only on his merit—he had been influenced by the knowledge that Gerard had earned a reserve commission!

"Pass the word along. Attack coming—"

Instantly, all were on the alert. There was a rustling of cloth, a clatter of equipment, as the men lined the parapet. And all could hear very plainly the

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slapping of bare feet on the ground. They were coming!

Gerard's throat tightened painfully. He wanted to scream. He was sincere in his desire for death. But a bullet through the brain in the excitement of a headlong charge was one thing. To be slashed to ribbons in the darkness was another. The thought of the large, bearded mountaineers trotting toward him *unseen,* brandishing cruel blades, filled him with cringing terror.

A machine gun hammered away on the right, suddenly. Answering shots darted across the way, sparkled along the slope. In a moment, the air was alive with whining metal. There was a steady pattering on the ground, bullets falling short of the trench.

A muffled cry, the curses of several men.

"Kauser's caught one, Sergeant. Shoulder—"

A fiery streak lashed the night, exploded into an intense, blue light, swinging as it dropped at the end of the tiny silken parachute. Black solhouettes were outlined, scurrying about, resembling the aimless flights of insects when a massive stone is lifted. Instantly, the whole trench was ablaze with firing.

The light went out, darkness rushed back, almost solid, as if it pressed hard upon men's eyeballs. The automatics pounded into the dark for fifteen seconds longer, stopped. In the direction of the village, the shooting continued unabated. A flare went up, divided and bloomed in two curving red stars.

Of course, that was the goal of the real attack, the village—just as Briffon had expected. The Riffi wished to hold that place in the morning, to check further advance, or at least delay it several hours. Time was precious to the enemy—for new warriors kept pouring to the combat from neighboring tribes.

A green flare fused high. The onslaught had been checked, the blacks still held the houses. The whole thing was chaotic, unreal, yet gripped in a certain, awing orderliness. The night was filled with fresh tumult, as batteries behind the French front dropped shells into likely gathering places. Many of the explosions could be seen from the lines.

"They're coming again—"

IV

IT WAS perhaps two-thirty in the morning when the reassuring green flare failed to rise from the village. The fifth attempt to storm it had succeeded. Before many minutes, the Legionnaires were hailed in French, and four or five survivors managed to come in. One of them, a big Dakar negro who spoke fluently, gave a somewhat coherent account.

"We beat them off four times. When they came again, we fired. But some must have hidden very near, the time before, and were over the walls and on us. They killed the lieutenant, the sergeant. We had lost some men before, from fire and grenades. There were too many for us."

Gerard sent these survivors to Captain Briffon. Then he gave orders for two of his automatics to be brought to bear on the hamlet, ready to open fire if the Riffi sought to emerge from it toward his position. He had a brace of lights fired, to ascertain the lay of the ground once more. Then all was quiet for some time.

The natives were satisfied with what they had done, and the French command evidently believed it would be best to postpone an attempt to recapture the village until daylight, when the

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artillery could be used without much risk of striking the Legionnaires on the left and the Senegalese on the right.

An hour passed, thirty minutes more.

Then occurred the first of a series of unbelievable incidents. Somewhere between the section of Legion and the jutting angle of the village, a drunken voice lifted in a ribald song.

Elle avait une jambe en bois,
Et pour que ça n'se voie pas
Elle f'sait mettre par endessous
Des rondelles en caoutchouc . . .

All identified that voice, raucous, breaking on the high notes with a peculiar, querulous trill. But it was impossible, absolutely impossible!

"Where's Kuchler—that sounds like Kuchler!"

"Kuchler, eh? Kuchler!"

Kuchler could not be located within the trench, and it was his voice singing out there in the dark, between the lines! He was moving about, probably had lost his way! From the village came rifle shots—the enemy had heard.

"Come back here, Kuchler, come back—"

The song was interrupted.

"That's a good one, come back! What do you guys think I'm trying to do? Send up a light. I'm all turned around—"

"This way, this way!"

"Give me a light."

"They'll shoot you, you fool!"

"They can't hit a thing—give me a light."

Kuchler started to sing again, probably to identify himself properly. At times, he came nearer, then he would drift away again. It was a strain to imagine him reeling, confident and heedless, with fifty marksmen shooting at the sound of his voice. Mathematically, within a few minutes, one of the bullets must strike him!

"All right—send up a light." Gerard surrendered at last.

The Legionnaires blinked into the glare, and saw Kuchler, not a hundred yards away, strolling about, bare-headed, in shirt and trousers.

"That's more like it," he approved. "Coming, coming!"

HE WAS unhurried, unperturbed. Bullets passed around him, struck the ground. By this time, shots resounded all along the lines, for the contagion had spread from man to man. At last, Kuchler came into the trench. Some of his comrades, angry at their own anxiety, started to pummel him about.

"Take it easy," he advised them. "Where's the kid—pardon me, the section commander?"

"Right here. Kuchler, I should report you."

"What for? For losing my way or for not getting killed?"

"Well, the captain may want to know what made all the row," Gerard said. "And if he heard you sing, he'll know you were soused—"

"You're stinking drunk, that's what."

"So that's why I was out there, eh? Because I'm soused? Know what I was doing, where I went, eh? I went to reconnoiter, to see if those snowballs told the truth, if their officer was dead."

"Cut the kidding," Gerard advised.

"Kidding, eh? Well, there he was, but they'd cut his head off. I could tell who it was by his boots. Right where we spoke to him this afternoon, and I'm sorry I was fresh."

"That's a good story," Gerard admitted. "But you'd hate to have to prove it. Enough gab, get to your post."

Kuchler uttered his cackling laugh. "Prove it? Prove it? I left my *capote* with my decorations on it, right there

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with that baby lieutenant who's got no head no more. You said once you'd bought my junk times and again. Well, I thought it over a lot. They're yours, but you'll have to pick them up where I left them for you. Go to it, junkman!"

"I'll have to pick them up?"

"You called me a drunken old gossip, you yelled I wasn't a man! You tell me I'm soused. If you're as good a man sober as I am drunk, go and get them. They're yours!"

A strange fury welled up in Gerard. He knew that this challenge, insane though it might sound, would be known everywhere in the battalion within twenty-four hours. If he accepted it, all would agree he had been a fool, but if he did not, he would lose prestige! The undertaking had succeeded because a crazy old man full of booze had blundered through—one needed a drunkard's luck for it!

He looked over the parapet. It was still very dark, and the firing in the immediate vicinity had abated.

"You left your stuff where we were this afternoon?"

"Sure. You bear left after reaching the first house. It's all there, the Cross, the Syrian medal with Silver Cedar, all my junk. All your junk now, kid."

"He's nuts," a Legionnaire spoke up. "Don't go, Sergeant."

This remark was all that was needed. So they were giving him an out—then they would say: "Kuchler went, but Gerard, who was always looking for a bullet, lacked the guts!"

"Who's the senior corporal here? Provera?"

"I am, yes."

"You're in charge."

Gerard pulled his képi tighter on his skull, wiped his hands on his trousers before picking up his bayonetted rifle. Crazy or not, sober or not, he had to go out there, in the darkness, to find that tunic and the decorations. Otherwise, life would be unbearable in this outfit, for Kuchler would insist, always, that Gerard talked more bravely than he acted.

"Listen, kid—" the old man's voice had altered, he laid a restraining hand on Gerard's shoulder. Gerard slapped him away.

GERARD vaulted over the parapet, stood in the open. He took a deep breath, started trotting in the darkness. What one man had done, another man could do. Especially if the second man did not care whether he returned or not.

He had no trouble finding the first house, a short distance away. His hand met the mud wall just about where he had expected it. And he could scarcely believe he had come this far within a few seconds. No one had challenged him—where were the sentries? Perhaps this would be easier than he had expected!

Reasoning a moment gave him the explanation. Just as he and his men had sought the side of the hamlet nearest to their enemy, the Riffi had gone through and were probably in the houses facing south. By chance, he had struck far enough to his left as he came to avoid their flanking sentry.

"Let's see," he mused, filled with the calm that came with acceptance of his fate. "About twenty strides forward and left brings me to another house. I edge along it, come into the open again. Fifteen steps farther is the hut where I spoke to Hanoteau."

He was off again, crouching, the long rifle, tipped with the twenty-two inches of quadrangular steel shoved forward. His boot struck something yielding—a corpse, undoubtedly a

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Senegalese, by the odor. Sure, they would be all over the place!

The second house . . . and an indistinct shape moving before him, a faint patch of white—a whispered question—Gerard snapped forward like a released spring. The bayonet must have gone in easily, for he found it buried to the hilt when his fingers groped to clear it. That was a job, because the blade had entered in the side of the neck and was caught in muscles and bones, having pierced through to emerge beneath the fellow's right ear.

"That's why he didn't yell?" he thought. "Lucky I'm lucky."

Fourteen steps, fifteen, sixteen—had he lost his way? No, there was the jagged edge of the wall, faintly outlined against the sky. This was where the officer had come. He rested against that unseen wall, breathed deeply, listeened. Nothing stirred inside, so he passed through the doorway.

He trailed the rifle in his left hand, groped with the right. His fingers touched and identified bodies, objects—a cartridge pouch, an empty automatic magazine, a canteen, another, a musette-bag holding grenades. Most of the roof had been blown off, and he could see the stars, as he had seen them from the bottom of a well, when he had been playing around a farm—long time ago—eleven, no—twelve years ago. . . .

"Steady," he advised himself. "I've got something to do."

He wondered how Kuchler had found the lieutenant's body in the darkness. He must locate that one corpse, because the *capote* and the decorations were with it. He had matches in his pocket. He struck one, but it was blown out immediately by the draft sucking through the holes. Another sputtered, went out, a third—

He had a small electric torch, in his pants-pocket. That would be dangerous. No, not if he shaded it with his hand and just lighted the floor. The small pool of white swept about some seconds. No coat—and he noticed that the bodies were stripped of clothing already. They would be—the beggars had been in the village some hours now, and seldom waited to loot.

Suddenly, he froze. His light rested on a face, Hanoteau's face. The head—the head! His hair bristled on his scalp, then he was startled to see that that head was connected with the torso—there were no cuts, no wounds in the neck. For a moment, Gerard felt his mind reel. Kuchler had seen the beheaded body, had known it by the boots—and the light proved that the boots were gone! He thought insanely, that it was as horrible to find a head when you did not expect to find it as to find no head when you expected to find one!

"He lied—he never was here—"

THAT was it. Old Kuchler had lied—he had spoken of boots when there were none, he had said the head had been cut—and there it was! Well, he, Gerard, would go back and call his bluff. Old or not, Kuchler would get a licking he would remember!

Without transition, he found himself on the floor, deafened, his eyes stinging, Then a weight smote him across the shoulders—a live, moving weight. He straightened his body, flung the warrior off before the blade could reach his neck. The torch—they'd seen the torch—he had forgotten to screen it—

He rolled to one side, recovered his rifle. Then leaped into a corner. His first shot missed, the second went home. Again, flame leaped at him, seared his neck, deafened him—odd that these lads had missed him twice at close range,

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when they hit a target the size of a man's hand at four hundred yards! He heard the metallic snap of the breech-block.

Gerard used his bayonetted Lebel as a lance, grasping the end of the butt in one hand. That gave him a reach of eight feet or so—ample in this case. The sudden heaviness proved he had rammed the steel into solid flesh. He recovered the weapon, leaped forward, and jabbed repeatedly into the squirming heap.

Then his foe was quiet. But there remained only a broken splinter at the tip of his rifle.

"Got to get back. Got to get back—"

The thought returned obstinately. He forgot that if he wished to die, this was a rare opportunity to do it in spectacular fashion. What he wanted most was a quarter of an hour's conversation with Kuchler. This was murder, the old guy had tried to murder him!

He dodged out of the hut.

There were men moving about, questioning one another in low voices. The guttural syllables of the mountain dialect had a ring of menace. Gerard flattened against a nearby wall, and they did not see him. Four or five huddled before the door to the hut, one must have entered, for there was louder speech, excited, angry. The Legion corporal grinned.

He had six grenades. He grasped the first, pulled out the ring, tossed it toward the ground. The thud of the missile striking the ground startled them. Then there was the rending explosion, the flash of yellowish flame. Gerard tossed another bomb, then ran to the left.

But he was brought up short—other mountaineers were appearing, from the defended side of the hamlet, attracted by the din. A group was in his way, several men, he could not discern how many. He leaped aside, came against a wall, skirted it until he found an opening. From the smells, he was not the sole occupant of this dark place, but he was the only one alive.

He huddled into a corner, facing the doorway, which he could distinguish only as a slightly paler area in the darkness. The others, outside, were looking for him. They called to one another in long hisses, exchanged a few words.

Then one of them was in the door. Gerard waited. Perhaps he would not step forward. But he did, and the Legionnaire fired. The intruder collapsed, started to moan almost immediately. Another vague shape stirred. Gerard pressed the trigger again. There was a click—nothing more. He changed magazines with fumbling fingers. By that time, the wounded chap had been hauled away.

Gerard waited for the rush—he probably would not be able to fire more than one shot. After that . . . Well, he would be like the lieutenant in the other hut, quiet and peaceful. Just a few seconds to endure, brief seconds of pain. . .

Here they were, here they were!

He could hear their footsteps outside, yet nothing showed in the doorway. *Thump!* What was it, what was that—a stone? No, a grenade, they had fought the grenades—

He had no time to drop—the explosion came. But he found himself standing, unhurt, gasping in the acrid fumes. He must not stay inside—they would throw others. His luck could not last. He ran out, collided with one of his foes, kept his feet by a miracle of energy, raced off.

Live, he must live. . . .

He stumbled on debris, hurdled one wall in a fantastic, terror-inspired leap, hobbled across a yard, clambered over

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another wall. His heart rattled in his chest like a straining motor. And a new horror gripped him—in the night, he had a chance to escape. But the sky was growing lighter, he could see the ragged edges of the tumbled buildings plainly.

They would stalk him and shoot him down like a hare.

This was the end, what he had sought.

They were shooting at random, hoping to hit him. No, that was not it—there were too many shots. Then the ominous *tap-tapping* of a Madsen automatic started nearby.

Gerard stumbed toward the sound, dragging his game leg. If he could reach the wall, climb it . . .

V

AFTER Gerard had vanished in the darkness, there was a brief period of stunned silence in the trench. Then Corporal Provera groped his way to Kuchler's side. The non-com was furious, because if anything happened to Gerard—and something would happen to him—he would be held responsible by the captain.

"What did you go and egg him on for, you souse?"

"Let go of me," the old chap said. "I'm not so drunk."

"What did you want him killed for?"

"Might as well be dead as the way he is." Kuchler talked coherently enough. "See, I went out of the line and sort of lost my way. Then, when I got in, it gave me an idea. What's the matter with him? Nothing much—he let a girl take the rap, die, or so he thinks. See, it preys on his mind. The sawbones will tell you that those mental things are bad. He feels his life's not his own—"

"So what?" Provera challenged.

"Thought it would be a good idea for him to sort of buy it back, by throwing it away or admitting it was worth looking out for, worth saving. I said that about the decorations, because of the way he talked. And he had to have something to go after—"

"You didn't think he'd do it, did you?"

"No. Would you?" Kuchler talked on, without conviction. "He'll turn back. You know how it is—you're willing to die and all that, but once out in the dark, he'll change his mind."

"He isn't the kind to change his mind—you've as good as murdered him!"

"He'll be back."

But minutes passed, and nothing happened. As usual, as soon as Gerard was missing, his comrades discovered his qualities. He was closer to them, out there in the darkness, than he had been when at their side. When the shots slapped out, there was an uneasy stirring.

"He's in there," some one said, unbelievingly.

"He's a fine kid, I always said so!" Kuchler remarked. Calmly, he tightened the buckle of his belt, picked up his rifle. "Well, so long."

"Eh, where are you going?" Provera challenged.

"After him."

It was so just that he should go that the others could not protest. Kuchler's reputation for nerve was at stake. He could not allow a man to go where he was afraid to go.

But another man followed him, a third, another. Provera himself was carried away. For the moment, bonds with the larger body, the company, had been severed. One of their own was out there, in danger. To risk many lives for one is foolish, but in that foolishness is rooted tradition.

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THEY found him early in the morning, after sweeping the village with bayonets and grenades. A handful, they had achieved what a battalion had been scheduled to do the following day.

Gerard had collapsed in the corner of a courtyard, crawled under débris. He grew conscious when deft hands smeared smelly, soft stuff over his face.

"What did they do, parboil you?" some one asked.

He had been burned by the shots fired so close to his face. There were scraps of metal in both his thighs. He had not felt them when the grenade had exploded.

Kuchler bent over him, tears streaming down his wrinkled cheeks.

"It was a gag, kid, just a gag—"

"A good gag, at that." Gerard tried to smile, winced. "I had it coming. Had a lot to learn—"

"Never thought you'd go, kid, never—" Kuchler hesitated. "Say, about that gabbing — I never got around to apologize, did I? I'm sorry—"

Gerard was surprised to find no resentment within himself. He had an immense sense of peace, of mental ease. He too had offered himself for death—and death had passed him by. Somehow, he felt, he had paid.

"Oh, that's old stuff now," he concluded.

Kuchler grasped a bandaged hand.

"You'll get the chevrons permanent for this—and a cross! More junk, eh?" the old man laughed. "I gave you a big build-up with Captain Briffon. He knows I know what's what. Don't worry, I'll have you an officer before long!"

Gerard nodded. Two men lifted the stretcher. Kuchler started to run alongside.

"And, kid"—he hesitated, grinning sheepishly—"if I can get leave, we throw a party the day you leave the hospital?"

Sunlight and Shadow

IN the years of 1931, 1932 and 1933, bellboys in some of America's leading hotels carried the small black bags of two men who looked like traveling-salesmen—but were not. The cases contained not samples of chewing gum or shirts, but instruments for measuring sunlight and ultraviolet radiation; and the two men were James E. Ives, senior physicist, and W. A. Gill, assistant chemical engineer, of the Public Health Service.

As a result of the Ives-Gill swing around the nation, it is possible that a future generation will be spared that disease so common to youngsters who grow up in the ultravioletless shadowland of our city canyons. Public-health boards can now estimate the amount of ultraviolet radiation because, thanks to two men who looked like traveling-salesmen but were not, they know how many foot-candles of sunlight are falling at any hour on any locality and can take steps to remedy any deficiency. At least that's the story. But, rickets or not, it is hard to imagine the Empire State Building being sliced off a half dozen stories just because Fifth Avenue has a foot-candle deficiency.

—*Crossen Howard.*

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Henry Plays a Hunch

By W. C. TUTTLE

NO amount of prune juice will solve the problem that has fallen upon the shoulders of Henry Harrison Conroy, that plump bespatted ex-vaudevillian who serves as Sheriff of Wild Horse Valley. Peter—known as Peter the Great—Morris has been found murdered in the main room of his Bar M ranch-house. Out in the nearby bunkhouse lie Dusty Cole, smiling, hard-riding young cowboy, and Juan Mendoza, Bar M cook. Both are unconscious.

Since Thunder and Lightning Mendoza, nephews of Juan Mendoza and employed by Henry on his ranch more for their incomprehensible English than for anything else, tell some wild tale about Dusty Cole having been knocked out by them after attacking the cook, suspicion naturally centers on Dusty. He is doubly damned because that morning he was fired by Peter Morris for asking for the hand of pretty Laura Morris. Dusty claims he was merely returning to the bunkhouse for his boots and found Juan Mendoza already unconscious—but to the mind of most of the citizens of Wild Horse Valley he is still the murderer of Peter Morris.

THE thing that adds to Henry's worries is that while he believes Dusty innocent, he himself is concealing evidence that might help to clear Dusty—a knife found near the body that is the property of Sam Hope, worthless son-in-law of Henry's friend Judge Myers. Sam has been recently accused by Morris of rustling Bar M cattle, and it is possible that he did the killing—but for the sake of the judge and of Molly Myers Hope, who still sticks by her husband despite his worthlessness, Henry does not want to incriminate Sam by producing the knife.

Sam, when questioned by the judge, growls surlily that he doesn't know where he was on the night of the murder. He was either drunk or crazy, he says—furthermore, he wants the judge to know that Mack Taylor, owner with Tuck Nash of a small gold mine nearby, has been calling on Molly. If this continues, Sam says, he'll kill Taylor. The judge refuses to believe this—but he does find that Taylor has been urging Molly to leave Sam Hope and marry him, though Molly has told Taylor to go away, that she's standing by Sam.

JUDGE MYERS tells these things to Henry. And to add to the confusion, Henry returns to the jail to find that his saturnine deputy, "Judge" Van Treece, has just discovered that some hacksaw blades have been thrown into Dusty Cole's cell by an unknown friend. A clue to who that unknown friend may be is given when Henry finds near the barn a note that has blown from near the jail. It reads:

> Destroy this note and come to the mine.
> Mack.

Next day the jury declares Dusty Cole guilty of murder in the first degree.

"Dusty Cole, stand up," says Judge Myers with obvious effort.

Dusty, who has been sitting beside Henry, unshackled, stands—but he also jerks to one side, heads toward the rear door of the courtroom with Henry's forty-five in his hand!

"Don't move!" he snaps at the crowd. "I'm goin' out—and I'll kill anybody who tries to stop me."

CHAPTER VI

ESCAPE

SWIFTLY Dusty backed toward that rear door, his forty-five menacingly in his hand. There were probably fifty holstered guns in that crowded courtroom, yet not a man moved to bring his forth. When Dusty's hand was fumbling behind him for the doorknob, someone in the far corner started to speak. His nearest

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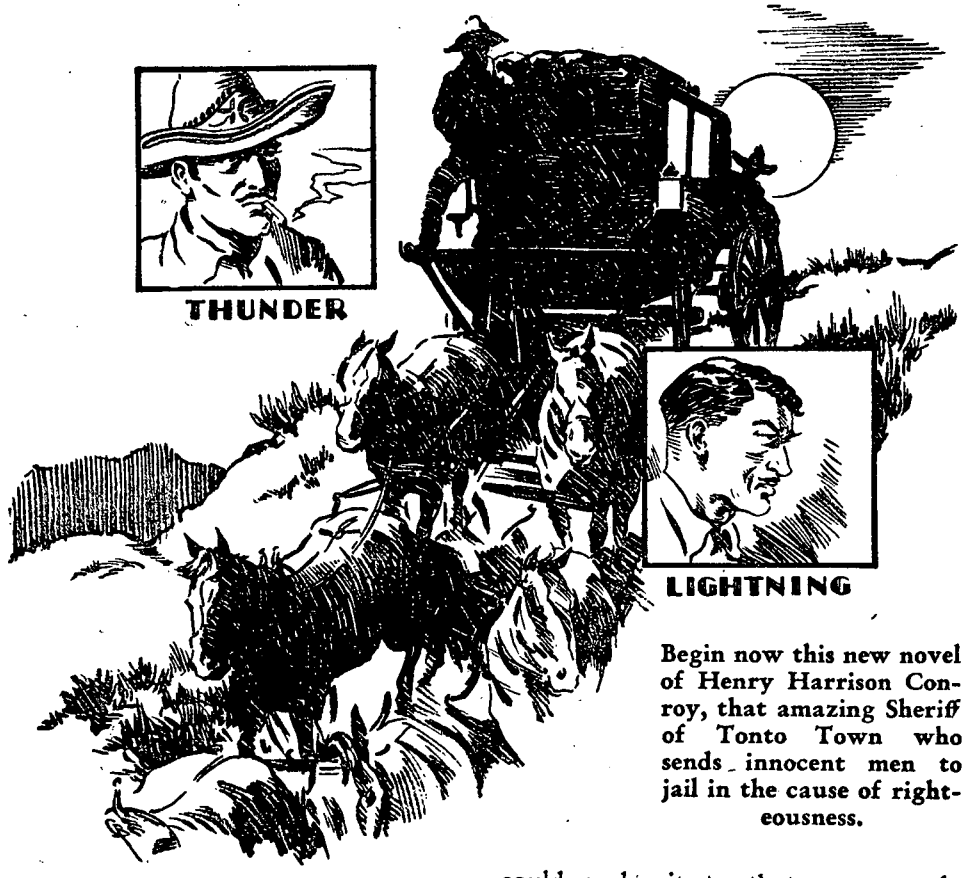

Begin now this new novel of Henry Harrison Conroy, that amazing Sheriff of Tonto Town who sends innocent men to jail in the cause of righteousness.

neighbor hushed him with a frightened look.

Then Dusty was gone, the door shutting hollowly behind him. Immediately the room was in an uproar. Henry, red-faced, panting, got to his feet.

"Get him!" he shouted hoarsely.

"He can git away, as far as I'm concerned," replied a cowboy near Henry.

Henry and Judge together strove to shove their way through the crowded room. Then someone yelled:

"Why don'tcha go down the way he went, you danged fools!"

Henry seemed to look sheepish. It was true that the door Dusty had fled through opened on a narrow stairway that led to the main entrance. Dusty could make it to that entrance far ahead of anyone going down the usual way.

"We may as well try that, Judge," said Henry, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

"Wasting all this time!" panted Judge.

When Henry and Judge at last reached the bottom of the narrow stairs, the crowd was already surging down the main stairway. A cowboy who had made it early yelled at them:

"Dusty and Sandy jist pulled out, and there ain't a danged saddle horse left at any of the racks. This kid here says that Sandy herded every horse out of town, before Dusty made his break."

"My goodness!" panted Henry. There was seeming concern written all

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over his face as they surged out into the street to find the cowboy's report confirmed.

"Our horses are still in the stable, Henry!" exclaimed Judge helpfully.

"My goodness!" gasped Henry. "What a day, Judge!" He grabbed Judge's arm as the latter started to run. "Not too fast. I am afraid I pulled a tendon on those devilish stairs."

Nevertheless, they finally reached their stable, followed by part of the crowd. There they brought up short. The door had been locked with a nearly new padlock!

Henry and Judge looked at each other questioningly.

"Well, sir, where are the keys?" gasped Henry at last.

"Keys?" wailed Judge. "Why, damn it, sir, I never saw that lock before in my life!"

"My goodness!" gasped Henry. "Someone has locked our stable door."

He sagged against the door and mopped his perspiring face.

"Well," remarked a cowboy, "it don't look as though Sandy and Dusty overlooked any bets. They shore figured on goin' *alone.*"

"I wonder which way they went," said Judge wearily.

"The kid said they went straight west," offered another cowboy.

"Go west, young man," muttered Henry absently.

"What did you say?" queried Judge.

"Nothing informative, Judge."

John Campbell, the prosecutor, shouldered his way past the crowd and confronted Henry.

"Good afternoon, John," said Henry dryly.

"Good afternoon, be damned!" snorted the lawyer. "Why didn't you have your prisoner handcuffed?"

"Handcuffed?" queried Henry. "Oh, yes—handcuffed. Well, John, he seemed so—er—resigned to his fate, as it were. Humiliation, and all that, you know. My fault, of course—entirely mine. There will be no stigma attached to you, of course. But isn't it human to err? I—I fear that I was mistaken in the young gentleman."

"Henry," declared Campbell, "you have proven to my satisfaction that you are a bungling, incompetent damned old fool."

Henry's eyes screwed up as though on the verge of tears, but a smile slowly creased his face.

"John," he said, "I'm not so *old.*"

Mumbling profanity, Campbell then whirled and went back up the street.

BY NOW, the missing horses were slowly being rounded up and brought into town, but Henry and Judge went into their office and closed the door.

"We must prepare a warning to telegraph to all counties in the state, Henry," said Judge. "The murderer must be recaptured."

"Oh, yes—of course," agreed Henry. He eased himself into his chair.

"I shudder to think of public opinion on this, Henry," wailed Judge. "It looks—I mean—well, confound it, sir, they will say that you aided and abetted Dusty Cole in his escape. We shall be lucky if they do not kick us out of office."

"And lucky if they do, Judge," added Henry.

"Why on earth did you forget to handcuff him, Henry?"

"My dear Judge! If I was so absent-minded as to forget to place handcuffs on his wrists, how on earth can I tell you how I forgot to do it?"

Temporarily, that silenced Judge. He

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looked narrowly at Henry for several moments.

"Rather coincidental," he said at last, thoughtfully.

"What was that, Judge?" queried Henry.

"That Sandy Crane should have turned all those horses loose and been ready at exactly the proper time for Dusty to join him."

"Um-m-m—yes," admitted Henry.

"They must have planned it all out, sir."

Henry nodded solemnly. "One would jump at that conclusion," he agreed. "Perhaps they talked the matter over—Sandy and Dusty—and—er—decided."

"Except for one thing, Henry," stated Judge. "Every time Sandy Crane has been here to see Dusty, I have been present. There has been absolutely no chance for them to have made any plans."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Henry innocently. "Do you suppose Sandy is a mind-reader, Judge?"

"Of all the asinine—hmph!" Judge snorted explosively. He whirled and stamped out of the office.

Henry went to the doorway. More of the loose horses were being brought into the street, and knots of men were standing along the wooden sidewalks, discussing the escape. Henry sighed and put on his hat.

"If public taste hadn't changed," he muttered to himself, "I might be still behind the footlights of a three-a-day vaudeville, following the trained dogs, and not be in danger from anything more formidable than an ancient egg. Henry Harrison Conroy, you are about as subtle as a drunken Indian. Damn it, sir, if you make another mistake, I shall be first to ask for your resignation as sheriff of Tonto Town."

Not caring to answer questions nor meet the inquiring glances of the men along the sidewalk, Henry left via the back door of the jail. He circled around to the courthouse, went straight up to Judge Myers' chambers.

The old judge was standing alone in his office, gazing through a window, his hands locked behind him. He turned as Henry came in. They looked keenly at each other.

"I presume he got away, Henry," said the judge quietly.

"Yes, Judge," nodded Henry. "Sorry. He is the first prisoner ever to escape from me."

"You did this for me, Henry," said the judge. "One word from you, and Sam Hope would—you know I am right. You never believed that Dusty Cole—"

"A jury is never wrong, Judge. They found him guilty."

"On the slimmest damned evidence I ever heard, Henry. As I told you before, I have never been obliged to pass a death sentence on any man or woman. It—it was a terrible task. When I saw Sandy Crane taking those horses—"

"My goodness!" interrupted Henry. "You sat there on that platform, where you could look down at the street and see Sandy Crane removing all the horses—and you never spoke?"

"Henry," replied the judge soberly, "my job is to sit here on the bench and *try* to judge my fellowmen—not to act as a dry-nurse to a lot of confounded cow ponies. I understand that someone padlocked your stable, so you could not get your horses, and—" Judge Myers smiled slowly, "and probably threw away the key."

"Ahem!" Henry cleared his throat raspingly. "Judge, I almost forgot the time. It is past my drink time—will you honor me?"

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"I shall be pleased to drink with you, Henry. But as far as any honor is concerned—I honestly believe we are a pair of lawless reprobates."

"But able to sleep tonight, Judge."

"That is true. But don't look so devilish self-satisfied, until we hear what the rest of the world has to say about it. I am not asking how you were able to plan all this out, but weren't you taking grave chances—letting Dusty take your gun? He might have shot someone in the courtroom."

"Not with my gun, Judge," assured Henry soberly. "It was loaded with blank ammunition. Shall we advance on those belated drinks?"

FRIJOLE BILL had brought Thunder and Lightning Mendoza to town, but they were too late to see the finish of the trial. They found Oscar Johnson at the office, and the big Swede told them what had happened. Frijole turned to the amazed Mexicans.

"Yuh see, now?" he jeered. "You fellers, with yore cockeyed testimony, almost hung Dusty Cole. Now he's loose, and I'll betcha he'll slit yore necks for what yuh done agin him."

Frijole knew that their testimony had little to do with the conviction of Dusty—but Lightning and Thunder did not know it. They believed every word of Frijole's dire prophecy. Then Oscar added his bit.

"Yah, su-ure," he agreed. "Dosty vill come back and yerk the leever out of both of you. By yimminy, if Ay vars in your place Ay vould ron like ha'al."

"Dios mio!" wailed Lightning. He turned savagely on Thunder.

"You see w'at you do?" he choked. "You say too damn much. Dusty ees *mucho malo hombre*. He ees mad from you, and pretty queek he ees come back and cut off your *cabeza* right behin' my damn ears."

"Aw, heck, you talked as much as Thunder," declared Frijole. "He'll cut off both yore heads. But that won't bother yuh for a couple weeks, 'cause it'll take yuh that long to find it out."

"W'ere you theenk he go?" asked Lightning.

"He's prob'ly hidin' in the brush behind our house," said Frijole soberly. "He'll prob'ly start carvin' yuh tonight."

"Madre de Dios!" gasped Lightning. He got Thunder by the sleeve and drew him outside the office. Lightning had a loaded gun concealed on his person. It was a very heavy forty-five, with a barrel only two inches long. Lightning had tied a string to the trigger guard, fastened it to a button on his pants, and lowered the gun inside the waistband. The weight made it difficult for him to keep his pants up.

"Sometheeng mus' be done," he told Thunder.

"W'at you theenk?" queried Thunder.

"Theenk? This ees no time for theenking; it ees time for doing, damn fast. Can't you say sometheeng, excep' jus' looking."

"Sure. Haitch is for hockleberries."

"W'ere the devil you leesten to theeng like that?"

"Oh, I'm hear Henry say that to Judge. Judge ask heem—why you don't say sometheeng, and Henry say haitch ees for hockleberry."

"Leesten," gritted Lightning. "I'm asking you to feeger sometheeng to save your damn life, and you spell hockleberry."

"Don't speet," ordered Thunder. "Can't you say 'Leesten' weethout making heem so wet? I'm leestening."

"We mus' leeve theese co'ntry."

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"W'ere we goin' leeve heem?"

"Leeve heem right here."

"That's good place for heem."

"Sure," said Lightning expansively. "I'm goin' buy quart tequila, and then we feeger next theeng for doing. Whoa, Beel! Theese damn gon almost pull my pant off. Leesten! Don't act scare. Act like notheeng ees going on. Wheestle—do sometheeng."

"W'at you like me to wheestle?"

"Dios mio!" grunted Lightning. "Every time I look at you I'm won'er eef I am not losing your mind."

"That ees seench," agreed Thunder brightly. "Go buy tequila."

IT WAS well after dark when the quart of tequila was finished, but that amount of potent juice of the maguey had failed to bolster the nerves of the two Mexicans. There was a night stage for Scorpion Bend, which left Tonto City at seven o'clock, driven by Nick West. They decided to take that stage.

The trip was entirely Lightning's scheme to get away from any possible assault by Dusty Cole. Neither of them had the price of a stage ride to Scorpion Bend, but they hung around until the stage was loaded. Then they managed partly to conceal themselves among some bales and boxes on the boot.

There were no paying passengers on the stage when it finally started. Nick West drove his stage over the long road toward Scorpion Bend, not knowing that he was taking two stowaways who clung to the swaying rear of that lurching old stage.

It was bright moonlight, and the dust, boiling up from behind the rear wheels, almost suffocated the two Mexicans. Otherwise, everything was all right until they reached the grades of Piñon Canyon. There the stage came to an abrupt stop. The heavy vehicle had made so much noise on the rocky road that neither Thunder nor Lightning had heard the sharp warning to stop.

Lightning eased an aching knee from under a tight rope and shifted his position.

"I theenk we meet somebodee," whispered Thunder.

"Sh-h-h-h!" hissed Lightning. "Theenk to myself, biffore somebodee find us."

They could hear voices, as though several men were talking. Slowly Lightning lifted his head above the rear of the stage, that he might get a view of what was going on. The bright moonlight illuminated the scene, showing two masked men, guns in hand, while near the wheel of the stage stood the driver.

"Madre de Dios!" gasped Lightning. With a trembling hand he grasped the string and drew the heavy gun from inside his waistband.

Cocking it carefully, he lifted it over the top, took careful aim at one of the bandits, closed both eyes and pulled the trigger. It might be more correct to say that he yanked the trigger. There was a spurt of flame, and the canyon walls blared back the roaring explosion of the heavy forty-five. The gun bucked out of Lightning's hand, broke the string with its own weight and went into the dirt.

The frightened team lurched ahead, broke into a run. They headed down the grade, tires screeching from the pull of the brakes, with Thunder and Lightning hanging on with both hands and both feet. They negotiated the first turn in safety, but came to grief on the next. There a front wheel crashed into the rocky corner, slewing the stage around. It dislodged both the clinging passengers, and jerked the team to a stop.

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Being suddenly bumped on the hard road for several moments, both Mexicans were utterly dazed. Lightning was the first to find his voice, and then it was only a wailing whisper:

"Thonder, are you keeled?"

"Sure," admitted the agreeable Thunder. "W'at in hell ees all the shooting for?"

"Leesten!" ordered Lightning breathlessly. "I jus' keeled Dusty Cole."

"No!"

"You theenk I'm seet here and lie?"

"W'ere ees Dusty Cole, Lightning?"

"I keel heem, I tell you. W'at ees the matter weeth my ears? Can't you hear notheeng? You come weeth me—I show you."

Cautiously they limped back up the grade, around the turn, and onto the straight piece of road where the holdup had occurred. Not a living soul was in sight, but there was something lying near the road, looking very much like the body of a man.

"You see heem?" breathed Lightning.

Very slowly they approached. It was a body, lying there unmoving. Both of the Mexicans were breathing heavily, as they approached the body. Reaching it, they stopped and stood stock still.

The moonlight slanted down into the pale face of Nick West, the stage-driver.

"Theese Dusty Cole hees get old queek," remarked Thunder.

"Brodder," choked Lightning, "we better go like hell from these places. I'm keel the wrong man."

"Wheech way you like from running?" asked Thunder.

"Tonto Ceety," whispered Lightning. "Nobody ees knowing we come here. *Madre de Dios,* thees ees terrible. They 'ang both of us."

"Together?" asked Thunder blandly.

"Don't stop for talkeeng."

"Sure. But w'y you theenk theese man ees Dusty Cole?"

"Biccause I'm seeing Dusty Cole and Sandy Crane weeth heem."

"Eef we go back, Dusty Cole ees keel hell out of us," protested Thunder.

"Leesten, my leetle brodder," said Lightning ominously, "we are in devil of a feex. If theese law don't 'ang us for morder, Dusty Cole hees keel us. Well? W'y don't you say sometheeng?"

"Haitch ees for hockleberry," replied Thunder.

"Come on," sighed Lightning. "Eet don't make no deeference which way I'm get keeled, biccause you are so dumb I won't feel eet, anyway."

CHAPTER VII

ARIZONA HAPPENSTANCE

HENRY and Judge were snoring heavily at the Tonto Hotel that night when Tom Rickey, the proprietor, hammered loudly on their door. Judge's snore ceased, and he sat up in bed, blinking at the moonlight through the window.

"Is it necessary to knock down the door?" he asked.

"Wake up!" called Rickey. "There's been a hold-up and attempted murder. Hurry up!"

"Did you hear that, Henry?" asked Judge.

"My goodness!" grunted Henry. "Some folks do select the most ungodly hours for their criminal activities. And I was enjoying a most wonderful dream. It seemed that I was—"

"There has been a robbery and attempt to murder!" interrupted Judge. "And you try to tell me about your dream."

Judge was hurrying into his clothes.

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"Pants," remarked Henry, "are for the legs. I'm afraid the sleeves of my coat would be a bit short for your shanks."

"Confound it!" snorted Judge. "You put your coat on top of my pants."

"The life of a fireman," sighed Henry, dressing as rapidly as possible. "I wonder who got robbed. However, I suppose we shall find out eventually. Mr. Rickey seemed rather heavy-handed. We'd better examine the hinges on our door in the morning. Ready?"

Already there was a small crowd in the little lobby when the two came out. The crowd hastened to inform Henry that the Scorpion Bend stage had been robbed by two bandits, and Nick West, the driver, had been shot. Two men, driving in from Scorpion Bend, had found the stalled stage. A little later they had come upon Nick West, staggering back toward Tonto City. They had brought him in and left him at Doctor Bogart's house.

Henry went down to see West. He was sitting in the doctor's office, still looking a little dazed, his head bandaged. Doctor Bogart said that a bullet had bounced off Nick's head, but that it was not serious.

"I dunno who shot me," said the driver. "It wasn't neither Dusty nor Sandy, 'cause I was watchin' them."

"Good Lord!" gasped Henry. "Dusty and Sandy—why, what do you mean?"

"They held me up," explained Nick.

"Hell's bells!" gasped Henry. "You —you recognized them?"

"Why, yeah. They wore masks, but that wouldn't keep anybody from recognizin' 'em. I asked Dusty what the heck he was tryin' to do, and he said, 'As long as they want to hang me, I might as well draw some pay for stretchin' their danged rope.'"

"Whimsical rascal," breathed Henry. "But that stage never carries any money, Nick."

"It did last night, Sheriff. There was a sealed box, which would weigh about seventy-five, eighty pounds, shipped by the Yellow Warrior mine."

"And they got it?"

"Yeah, they got it all right."

"My goodness; But you say neither of them shot you, Nick?"

"Couldn't. They was facin' me—and I was hit from behind."

Nick had told the same story to the two men who brought him to town; so the story quickly spread. Henry went to the office, where Judge was waiting for him. He told Judge about the theft.

"Over twenty thousand dollars in gold bullion!" exploded Judge. "So Dusty wants pay for stretching rope, does he?"

"He does seem rather mercenary, Judge," sighed Henry. "But I suppose he considers it the last job he will ever do; so he wants it to be a paying one."

"Your levity is unseemly, sir," declared Judge. "They are saying that you aided and abetted Dusty Cole in his escape. Damme, sir, if that is true you are as guilty as he. You foisted a monster upon Wild Horse Valley."

"Well," sighed Henry, "it—it was a nice night for foisting. Where do you get all those fancy words, Judge? Thwart and foist. If this continues I shall need an interpreter. Why not go back to bed? There is no earthly use of riding out to Piñon Canyon. Certainly, those two bandits are not waiting for us there. In the morning we will ride out and search for clues."

"Clues! Why, the driver recognized Dusty and Sandy. What more evidence do you need, if I may ask, sir?"

"Judge," replied Henry quietly, "I

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fear that I am becoming a confirmed skeptic."

"I have my own opinions, sir," replied Judge.

"I shall not argue with you, Judge," stated Henry gently. "Any time I desire an argument I shall contact someone whose mind is nearly as flexible as a yard of concrete. Shall we retire?"

DAYLIGHT found Henry and Judge out on the Piñon Canyon grade. Judge had grumbled and growled all the way out there. He hated to ride a horse. But Henry was adamant—so Judge was with him. It was not difficult to find the spot where the holdup had occurred, because the stage driver had told Henry.

Just beyond the spot on the grade was a small canyon, brushy and concealed by a sprawling sycamore, where the two bandits had left their horses. There was no evidence which way they had gone, but Henry presumed that they had turned back into the valley.

As they mounted their horses to start back home, Henry saw an object in the dusty road. He quickly dismounted and picked up a heavy revolver with a two-inch barrel. Hanging to the trigger guard was a few inches of dirty cord. One chamber had been fired.

Henry handed the gun to Judge. The latter looked it over critically.

"That gun," declared Judge, "looks familiar, Henry. The barrel has been sawed off."

"Yes," nodded Henry. "I sawed it off three months ago. Then I stood ten feet from a five-cannon can, fired six shots and never hit the can once. Then I threw the gun in a dresser drawer at the JHC.'

"But," said the puzzled Judge, "how on earth did it get here?"

Henry shook his head slowly.

"And why is there a string attached?" queried Judge.

"Well," replied Henry, "that might have been attached to increase the mystery."

"I wonder if that is the gun with which Nick West was shot."

"It has been fired once, you will observe," said Henry. "Let me concentrate for a moment, Judge. There are Frijole Bill, Thunder and Lightning—they were in town last night, I believe."

"Yes," agreed Judge. "I saw those two impossible Mexicans last night. But Henry, I—I believe we shall have to look further. When Frijole Bill drove back to the ranch, both Mexicans were with him."

"You can vouch for that?"

"Absolutely. I heard Frijole berating them for spending all their money for tequila."

"Hm-m-m. That does complicate things. But who in the devil took my gun away from the ranch, I wonder."

"Possibly those two Mexicans sold or traded it. They have no idea of right or wrong, Henry. We shall question them."

"I hope we have more success than the coroner had, Judge—or the prosecutor."

As they rode back toward Tonto City Judge said:

"Henry, we must capture Dusty Cole. I doubted his criminal tendencies when he was arrested; and my sympathy was with him during the trial—but the man is thoroughly bad. This robbery proves it. And if we don't capture him, we may as well resign. The county will not stand for us any longer."

Henry nodded solemnly. "Perhaps you are right, Judge. We are both growing too old for active service. I mean, collectively. Personally, I am

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still in the prime of life, but you are—"

"Wait a minute, sir!" interrupted Judge. "I am still on this side of sixty."

"*This side*—yes," admitted Henry. "I have been called an old man, but no one has ever said, as they have of you, that I was an *elderly* man."

"Some day," said Judge ominously, "I hope I catch the editor of the *Scorpion Bend Gazette* hung up in a barb-wire fence. He also called you a red-faced nincompoop. Or was it a red-nosed one?"

"I wish they would leave my nose out of it," said Henry. "After all, my nose is not to blame for my failings."

"He said it was so big that it gave you a distorted view of the world, Henry."

"Well," said Henry, "I believe we should concentrate more on the problems at hand, and ignore the sarcasm of a jaundiced editor."

"That is true," agreed Judge. "I suppose it would not be good policy to mention that gun."

"Hardly," replied Henry dryly. "They might accuse one of us of shooting Nick West from behind."

When they got back to town, they found Nick Borden, the superintendent of the Yellow Warrior mine, waiting at the office. He told them that the sealed box had contained eighty pounds of gold bullion.

"As an added precaution," he told Henry, "we brought that shipment in at the last moment and put it on the stage. I can't imagine how on earth they could know about it."

"Possibly they did not know—merely happened to strike it," suggested Henry.

"Well, that is possible. But it seems strange that they should happen to stick up that stage and get the first shipment we ever sent out in that way."

"Anything can happen in Arizona," remarked Henry wearily.

MACK TAYLOR and Tuck Nash rode in from their Spotted Horse mine that afternoon, and Mack Taylor came down to the sheriff's office. They had heard about the stolen shipment of gold, but Taylor wanted more of the details.

Henry explained what they knew about the hold-up. Taylor remarked that Dusty and Sandy had lost no time in picking up some easy money. Without any comments, Henry then handed Mack Taylor the note he had found beside the stable. The good-looking mine operator flushed, laughed shortly and handed the note back to Henry.

"I wrote it," he admitted wryly. "I figured that Dusty was innocent of that crime—and I knew what that jury would do to him. That doggoned note blew away, in the dark, when I tried to put it through the window."

"We found the saws," said Henry. "The note lodged against the front of my stable." And then: "What do you think of Dusty now?"

Mack Taylor shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it kinda looks like he turned wild, Sheriff. Might as well though. A man under sentence of death isn't goin' to Sunday School—not regularly."

"I suppose that is true," sighed Henry.

"I hope yuh won't mention that note, Sheriff," said Taylor. "I never even told Tuck Nash about it. Mebbe I was foolish to do it, but I wanted to help the kid out."

"Oh, it doesn't matter—now," replied Henry. "He never used the saws. How are things at the Spotted Horse?"

"Well, they're lookin' a little better.

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We've been workin' on a seam of ore that looked like it might develop into somethin'. Most of our ore is in pockets—but that's all right, if the pockets are rich enough. We're gettin' along all right, though."

After Taylor left the office, Judge came in with Edwin Corley, chairman of the mine commissioners. Henry groaned softly. Corley was from Scorpion Bend, a hard-faced, sour-minded person who disliked humor in any form.

"I just came from the prosecutor's office," he told Henry at once. "He is very pointed in his remarks regarding your ability. Personally, I believe you are making a farce out of this office. The people of Wild Horse Valley have been very patient and lenient, it seems to me. Dusty Cole's escape seemed well planned, don't you think?"

"Their timing was excellent, sir," agreed Henry warmly. "One might almost believe that it had been rehearsed. However, it was merely a coincidence, of course."

"Um-m—hah!" snorted Corley. "I suppose it was a coincidence that you did not have handcuffs on the prisoner, Sheriff."

"Exactly," agreed Henry. "Dear me, I regret that oversight. But everyone is prone to make mistakes. The human element again, sir."

"All right!" snapped the commissioner. "We are giving you one week to capture Dusty Cole, Conroy. Unless with one week you can produce that bandit in court, we shall take action against you. You are on probation, sir. I give you good day, sir."

"I take it—and thank you, sir," replied Henry with apparent soberness.

Corley strode noisily out.

"You handled that very well, Henry," said Judge.

"I think so," agreed Henry. "I was gentle, but firm. I suppose he thinks that I am worried about his threats of action."

"Corley will keep his word, Henry."

"I hope you are right, Judge; so few people do. I grow weary of this job. I feel that I am too young to waste the best years of my life. Now, if you had the job, Judge—at your age—"

"You let my age alone!" snapped Judge. "Best years of your life—indeed! Confound it, will you ever be serious. If you are weary of this job, please consider me—and Oscar."

"I do, Judge—indeed I do. I was joking. But would you have me strike a pose, hammer on my swelling bosom, and proclaim to the world that I am going to capture Dusty Cole, or die in the attempt? I have never played heroic roles, Judge. Mine has always been the sly,subtle humor, invoked by a flaming proboscis and the ability to mis-juggle three billiard balls. A star in my own right—but always spotted so close after a trained dog act that the public thought I was an encore. But I was a free man. My soul was my own—after my third daily appearance."

"I suppose you miss the applause, Henry," said Judge.

"Miss it? Good heavens, I have missed it all my life!"

Judge grinned and tilted his chair against the wall.

"Oscar is drinking heavily," he told Henry. "Love, I suppose."

"I thought he was through with Josephine."

"He was—for an hour or two. Henry, I wish we knew how your gun got out to Piñon Canyon grade."

"Rather puzzling, Judge. No doubt it had assistance in getting out there, because even an Arizona gun is still considered an inanimate object. I be-

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lieve I shall ride out to the ranch this evening. Want to go along?"

"Yes, I believe I do, Henry. Frijole might have some ideas on that gun question."

CHAPTER VIII

MARIHUANA MADNESS

LIGHTNING and Thunder Mendoza rode wearily to the JHC Ranch. They had been on a roundabout trip to Piñon Canyon grade, trying to find that sawed-off six-shooter, but with no success. As they turned their tired horses into the corral, Lightning said:

"Theese ees torrible. Like Frijole say, I am so dang' low I can put on plog-hat and walk over snake's belly. You know w'at I mean, my leetle brodder?"

"Sure," replied Thunder brightly. "I see peecture one time."

"Peecture from what?"

"Saint Patrick. He ees wear plog-hat and step on snake."

"I'm not spik from peectures, leetle *idiota*. Some day I shake you so 'ard my teeth all fall out. You re'lize w'at theese min? W'en those gon ees find by somebodee, Señor 'Enry ees saying, 'Ah-ha, those dawn *Mejicano!*' "

"You theenk he blame us from stealing those gon?"

"*Dios mio!*" exclaimed Lightning. "Who else you theenk steal?"

"Maybe he theenk he lose himself."

"Oh, sure," grunted Lightning, exasperated. "Leesten, my brodder! If Señor 'Enry ees saying, 'Thonder, who steal my gon?' W'at you say?"

"Lightning he steal eet."

"You say those? Yah! You tell heem? Some day I keel you damn dead."

"Sure."

"You tell heem you never see those gon. You onnerstand?"

"Sure. Maybe I am saying, 'W'at gon you are spiking of?' "

"You never see any gon!"

"What the heck are you revolutionists talkin' about?" demanded Frijole, who had approached unnoticed. "What gun are yuh yellin' about?"

Lightning drew a deep breath of consternation, but his brain functioned swiftly.

"Thonder ees lying 'bout gun he is seeing een *Mejico*. He say those gun shoot t'ree mile."

"Heck!" snorted Frijole. "I've fired guns that shoot fifty miles."

"Seex-shooter?" queried Thunder.

"No—shotguns, you danged fool! Go wash yore dirty faces—supper's ready. And if yuh don't—well, well! Here comes Henry and Judge!"

"*Madre de Dios!*" gasped Lightning. "Sometheeng ees goin' 'appen."

Thunder and Lightning hurried up to the back porch, and there proceeded to wash their faces and hands violently. When Henry and Judge rode up, Frijole immediately asked them to stay for supper. They accepted promptly. Then, before the two Mexicans had returned, Henry asked Frijole if he remembered that sawed-off Colt forty-five.

"Shore," replied Frijole. "It's in the top drawer of that bureau in the house."

"It *was*," said Henry. "It is now in my office. I picked it up on Piñon Canyon grade, where it had been dropped during the hold-up. I have reason to believe that it is the gun which shot Nick West."

Frijole scratched his head, staring at Henry, a puzzled frown on his wizened face.

"Heck, that ain't possible!" he ex-

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claimed. "But dang it, you ort to know that gun. You sawed it off yourself."

Henry nodded and looked toward the back porch. Frijole followed his gaze, but turned quickly back to Henry.

"Thinkin' about them two snake-hunters?" he asked. "Well, they went to town with me, got full of tequila, and came home with me."

"Could they have sold or loaned the gun, I wonder?" said Judge.

"Well, that's possible," remarked Frijole, "Why not ask 'em?"

"I will," said Henry.

Frijole laughed and shook his head. "They're scared plenty," he said. "They're afraid that Dusty will cut off their ears for testifyin' against him."

"Somebody should cut off their ears for murdering the King's English," declared Judge. "Their testimony did not help nor harm Dusty Cole, because they never did manage to answer a question."

"You let me handle the questions this time, Judge," said Henry.

"You might do much better with a shotgun," said Judge.

THEY were nearly finished with supper, and the early fears of Thunder and Lightning had been banished. Frijole and Judge were beginning to wonder if Henry had changed his mind. Suddenly, then, he leaned across the table, shook a forefinger in Lightning's face and said:

"You stole my gun and shot Nick West!"

Lightning leaned back in his chair, wide-eyed with fright and unable to say anything.

"You!" Henry turned and jabbed the finger at Thunder. "You were with him! Well, well! Why don't you say something?"

"Haitch ees for hockleberry."

Judge choked and Frijole hammered him joyfully on the back. Henry bowed his head, his eyes filled with tears, unable to follow up his third-degree.

"Of w'at gon are you spiking about?" asked Lightning huskily.

"The gun you used to shoot Nick West," wheezed Henry.

"The one weeth the forty-feefth caliber?" asked Thunder.

"The one with the sawed-off barrel," whispered Henry.

"How you know he shoot heem?" asked Thunder.

Henry wiped away his tears and looked keenly at Thunder.

"A man saw him fire the shot," lied Henry.

"Leesten, my leetle brodder," said Lightning. "Every time I open your mouth I put my feet in eet. No man see heem. Dosty Cole and Sandy Crane ees hiding out in the heels. Nobody else ees there for seeing. *Dios Mio!* Eef you have twice so much sense as I am, you are still idiot."

"Sure," agreed Thunder blandly. "Nobody ees seeing you shoot. Anyhow, theese man ees not die. All hees got ees bomp on hees *cabeza.*"

"That seems to be settled," said Henry dryly. "Did you see the two men who held up the stage?"

"I see," declared Lightning. "Dosty Cole and Sandy Crane. I'm tak' shot as Dosty, but that gon ees not shoot where I am looking."

"What on earth were you doing on that stage?" asked Judge.

"Hanging on tight," replied Thunder. "We are scare biccause Dosty Cole cut off our ear."

"I see. You believed he would revenge himself upon you for your testimony; so you tried to leave the country."

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"I'm 'ave only two ear," said Lightning soberly.

Henry sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"Judge, I'm afraid there is no question as to the identity of the two bandits. Three men have already identified them."

"Try and get 'em," said Frijole. "They know every inch of this valley, and they're both danged good shots. Dusty can shoot the buttons off your vest, as far as he can see 'em—and Sandy's no slouch of a shot. Mebbe you'll get 'em eventually, but I'd hate to think how many cripples you'll have before they're behind the bars."

"Cripples? My goodness!" exclaimed Henry.

"You swore to uphold and enforce the laws, Henry," reminded Judge.

"Eh? Oh, yes—I suppose I did—foolishly. Frijole, that did not happen to be Bill Shakespeare in that stew, did it?"

"No, no, that was Oliver Cromwell. Yuh see, Old Bill's gettin' what they call astigmatism. Yesterday mornin' he chased a skunk down the dry wash—and got too close. All the rest of the chickens are under the stable, and poor old Bill is out there alone, wonderin' what in heck's come over the country. It won't last long, cause he's only got his wing-feathers and one tail-plume left."

"If this wave of crime continues," sighed Henry, "I'm afraid that I will be in much the same condition as Bill Shakespeare."

"Yuh mean—the skunk?" asked Frijole.

"No—the feathers," smiled Henry.

A SHORT time later Henry and Judge rode back to Tonto City and stabled their horses. They were crossing the dimly-lighted street toward the Tonto Saloon, when a lone rider galloped into town. He was sending his mount at top speed straight toward them.

Judge cried out, sprawled in the dirt to escape the animal's flailing hoofs. The horse sped on without swerving, straight toward the Tonto hitch-rack, the rider still spurring viciously.

The animal hit the rack with a terriffic crash and went down, flinging its rider over the top pole. The rider lay there, unmoving.

At the sound of the crash men came running from the saloon and across the street. Judge picked himself out of the dust, and he and Henry walked over. Already men were lighting matches above the huddled form there on the ground.

"It's Sam Hope," blurted one of the men. "Good Lord—he must have raced his horse right into the hitch-rack. Somebody get Doc Bogart—quick."

The horse sprawled under the rack, its neck broken. Someone stripped off the saddle and bridle. Doctor Bogart was on the scene moments later. He directed the bystanders to carry the injured man to his house.

When the doctor had had time to make his examination, Henry followed. Bogart shook his head as Henry entered.

"Collar bone broken, right arm broken, possible internal injuries and concussion," enumerated the doctor.

"It is very strange," said Henry. "Sam Hope knows this town—and yet he rode his horse at full speed into that hitch-rack. How do you account for that, Doc?"

"This might be a solution, Henry," replied the doctor.

He pointed to the table on which had been piled the contents of Hope's

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pockets. Among them was a small, cloth tobacco sack, about half filled. Doctor Bogart opened the sack and sifted some of the contents on a piece of writing paper.

"I still do not understand, Doc," said Henry. "Tobacco, isn't it?"

"Flake cut tobacco, heavily mixed with marihuana."

"My goodness! Why, Doc, he must have crazy with that stuff."

"Speed crazy," said the doctor soberly. "That's the way it affects some people."

"Will he live?" queried Henry.

"It's too early even to guess at that, Henry, too soon to estimate his injuries. He must have been thrown very hard. I'll have to find a nurse for him."

"His wife is out at the Morris ranch, I believe."

"Is she? Well, I suppose you should send someone to notify her."

"Jim McDonald was there at the Tonto. He will tell her. I don't believe she had any suspicions that Sam was smoking marihuana."

"No need of making it public, Henry. After all, it won't help either of them."

"I suppose that is true."

AN HOUR later Henry was crossing the street to his office when he saw the team and buckboard from the Morris ranch pass the lights of the general store and go toward Doctor Bogart's home. It was Jim McDonald, bringing Molly Hope.

Henry hesitated for a moment, then turned and went in the same direction. Judge Myers had heard about the accident, and when Henry arrived at the doctor's house the judge was talking on the porch with McDonald. Molly was in the house with Doctor Bogart.

Judge Myers turned to Henry.

"You saw him ride into the hitch-rack, Henry?" he queried.

"Yes, I did, Judge. In fact, he nearly ran Judge Van Treece down, just before he crashed."

"Mighty queer," muttered the judge. "Badly broken up, too. Might not recover. Feel sorry for Molly. Even after the things Sam has done, she still—well, I never understood women, Henry."

"Does anyone?" queried Henry. "Adam didn't—and he had the only one there was, I believe. What can we poor mortals expect, with millions of them running loose?"

"Not even a Chinaman's chance," declared McDonald.

As the three men stepped into the living-room, Molly and the doctor came out of the bedroom. Molly was pale and distraught, but smiled at Henry.

"Any change, Doc?" asked Henry.

"Not any, Sheriff; he is still unconscious."

"I am going to stay and nurse Sam, Dad," announced Molly.

"It is her idea," stated the doctor.

"Well, I suppose it is all right," said the judge slowly.

"Wonderful," said Henry. "Better than—"

Henry's statement was interrupted sharply. An explosion rattled the windows of the frame cottage, as though a heavy shot had been fired inside the place. Doctor Bogart whirled, stepped quickly across the room and flung open the door of the room where the unconscious man had been placed.

A lamp was lighted on the table, showing the eddying wisps of powder smoke blowing back from an open window.

"Wait!" exclaimed the doctor, backing quickly. "Mrs. Hope, don't go in there. Henry, I'm afraid—"

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Henry shoved past the doctor and went quickly to the bed. As he drew the sheet over Sam Hope's face, his usually florid face was very white. Molly was looking at him, a dazed expression in her eyes.

"For God's sake, what happened?" muttered the judge.

"Somebody shot through the window," whispered Henry. "You'd better get Molly away, Judge. Of all the damnable things!"

Henry hurried outside. Of course there was no one in sight, and no chance in the darkness to track the man down. Henry walked on down to his office, found Judge and Oscar there. Quickly he explained that someone had fired a shot through the window and killed Sam Hope.

"Yumpin' Yudas!" exploded Oscar. "Even a sick man ain't safe in dis ha'ar country."

"Why on earth would anyone shoot Sam Hope?" queried Judge tensely.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Judge," replied Henry.

"Hm-m-m! Still unconscious when killed, eh? Henry, it looks as though somebody did not want him ever to recover consciousness again."

"Isn't that rather elemental, Judge?"

"Can you suggest a deeper motive, sir?"

"I am afraid not, Judge. It is rather puzzling. Why on earth did Sam Hope crash his horse against that hitch-rack? Was he running away from somebody, I wonder—riding blind with fright? Did he have something to tell, or was it a personal matter, involving himself and another party—someone who arrived, found him badly injured, and waited outside that window for a chance to end the feud."

"One solution is as plausible as another, Henry. But no matter what solution—it is cold-blooded murder, sir."

"Yes, that is true. Shooting an unconscious man is about as cold-blooded as any murder can possibly be. There must have been a mighty strong motive, Judge. Men do not kill in that way for amusement. Were you about to speak, Oscar?"

"Ay vars yust going to say that das ha'ar country is getting tough as ha'al," replied Oscar.

"Well, that is worth a thought," agreed Henry dryly. "Have you any suggestions, Oscar?"

"Ay vould say dat de t'ing to do is keep de vindow shut."

"Try matching that one, Judge," said Henry, "while I go to bed and get a little sleep. There is going to be work to do."

"Good! At last you are stirred, Henry. Well, the sovereign State of Arizona will not find us wanting."

"I hope," said Henry, "that the sovereign State of Arizona will find us *getting*. And I also hope that it won't be the worst of it."

CHAPTER IX

OSCAR SORROWS

LIGHTNING MENDOZA came to Tonto City next morning to get the mail, loaded his brain with information, and went back to the ranch, swelling with importance.

"*Alto*, look and leesten," he exploded to Frijole Bill and Thunder. "Las' night Sam 'Ope hees try to keeling heemself. I'm theenk he is missing. Then he ees go to slip in Doctor Bogarts' 'ouse, and somebodee ees shooting heem in the head, right behin' my ear."

"Well, I'll be a liar!" exclaimed Frijole.

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"Sure," agreed Thunder. "That ees w'at Judge say."

"Judge says what?" demanded Frijole.

"That you are liar."

"Keep yore bill out of this," warned Frijole. "What else happened, Lightning?"

"Well," replied Lightning, swelling importantly, "this morning theese officer against the law 'ave offer two meelion dollar for Dosty Cole, one meelion dollar for Sandy Crane, and for these people wheech keel Sam 'Ope, so much."

"So much what?"

"So much more, I'm theenk."

"Dead or alive?"

"Mus' be alive, or they don't wan' heem."

"Does the reward say 'dead or alive'?"

"I never read heem."

"Who told yuh about it?"

"Oh, I jus' leesten."

"Uh-huh. Didja see Henry or Judge?"

"No. Somebody ees saying they 'ave gone to catch theese keeler from people. Oscar ees ronning the jail."

"Did he tell yuh anything?"

"Sure. He tell me to get to hell out from 'ere."

"Well, I'll be danged!" snorted Frijole. "So Sam Hope tried to kill himself—and missed. Too drunk to shoot straight, eh? Well, I'll believe that."

"He keel hees 'orse," offered Lightning.

"Huh? The heck, he did! Missed himself and hit his horse. But if he missed himself, why did he go to bed at Doc Bogart's place?"

"To sleep, I'm theenk," replied Lightning.

"Yeah! I reckon that's way most folks go to bed. Million dollars reward, eh? Yo're crazy, Lightnin'. Have you any idea how much a million dollars is?"

"Mucho dinero," grinned Lightning. "I never see heem."

"I hope to tell yuh—yuh never seen that much. Why, if you had a million silver dollars, you couldn't put 'em in this house."

"Why?"

"Well, yuh jist couldn't—that's why."

"You theenk I geeve damn? Huh! I keep heem in bonkhouse."

"Keep it in yore pocket—who the heck cares!" snorted Frijole.

"Tak' theese paper money," suggested Thunder. "He don' weigh so much."

"Yea-a-a-ah!" snorted Frijole. "Is it any wonder I drink prune whisky? If Henry don't git some white men out here to take this here burden off my soul, I'll go crazy as a bedbug in another week."

"You theenk Dosty Cole keel Sam 'Ope?" queried Lightning.

"Heck, yes! He thought Sam was you."

"Dios mio!"

"Yeah, you better git scared enough to talk Mexican. Why, you even had to up and tell Henry that you seen Dusty and Sandy hold up that stage. Golly, yo're shore pilin' up trouble for yourselves."

"You theenk it ees bes' for lying?"

"Well, jist take me for example," replied Frijole. "If I ever told a man the truth, and found it out, I'd come right back and correct m'self. I'm in good health, ain't I? Ain't nobody gunnin' for me. I'll tell yuh this much—I use common sense."

Duly impressed, Lightning said:

"W'at you theenk we should do, Frijole?"

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"Do? Why, if I was you fellers I'd try and find Dusty and Sandy—and kinda apologize. Might save yore ears, yuh know."

"Eef we find heem, you theenk he leesten?" asked Thunder.

"Oh, sure. Dusty is a great feller."

"Bueno!" Lightning turned on Thunder. "Leesten, you bongler! W'en we find these Dosty Cole, you let me do the talking, you onnerstand? You are always putting your feet een my mouth. Don't say notheeng."

"Sure," agreed Thunder. "You do the talkeeng, but I tell you theese much —I do my own ronning."

FAR out in the hills, where the mercury registered about 110 in the shade, rode Henry and Judge, with Henry in the lead. Heat waves danced across the rocks, and the sun beat mercilessly down upon the two riders.

"I hope you fry in your own grease," groaned Judge.

"Very likely," replied Henry, "but I will not stick to the pan, like you will. In a heat like this, grease is a boon. I may brown, but I doubt if I shall burn."

"This is all so confounded useless, Henry. Riding for miles and miles in the devilish heat, uphill and down. My canteen is boiling. After all, why do you insist on such ridiculous procedure?"

"We, my dear sir, are upholding the law," replied Henry. "We are doing something. After all, the world expects us to act like officers of the law. Criminals will not come to us; so we go to the criminals. Does that enlighten you, Judge?"

"Oh, I see," groaned Judge. "We are going to the criminals. And if I may be so bold as to inquire—when do we get there?"

"That has nothing to do with the case, Judge. Inevitably, I hope, we will run them to earth. We shall ride these hills until our hoofmarks have registered on every pinnacle, and we know every rock by its first name. Two savage old wolves, prowling . . . prowling . . ."

"Prowling! Wolves! A pair of blasted old fools, frying their brains out, and not even a will o' the wisp to follow. Do you expect to find Dusty and Sandy sitting out here on a pinnacle, waiting for us?"

"No, I do not expect them, Judge. But if they should be—our chase is ended. I believe in the element of surprise. They expect us to be in the shade of our office. They would feel that we are far too brainy to be doing this. Do you understand my theory?"

"Theory or not, I still think you are crazy, Henry."

They drew up on a pinnacle which overlooked a little valley. Less than a mile way was the Spotted Horse mine, owned by Mack Taylor and Tuck Nash. It had been an abandoned property until Taylor and Nash relocated it and installed a small stamp mill.

"I have been feeling a few pangs of hunger and thirst," declared Henry. "I suggest that we go to the Spotted Horse and see if Messrs. Taylor and Nash have ought to eat and drink."

"Thank Heaven for a bit of normalcy in your mind, sir," sighed Judge.

They found Mack Taylor at the mine cabin, cooking a meal. He welcomed them warmly and invited them to eat. Tuck Nash had gone to Tonto City that morning, but had not come back yet; so the murder of Sam Hope was news to Taylor.

Henry watched Taylor closely, wondering what his reactions would be,

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because he remembered what Judge Myers had said about Taylor being in love with Molly Hope. But Taylor's face told him nothing.

"That'll be tough on Hope's wife," he said. "She really cared a lot for Sam, even if he wasn't much good. But who in the devil would shoot him, I wonder?"

"Sam spent quite a little time out here, did he not?" queried Henry.

"Well, he was out here once in a while. As a matter of fact, he was short of money most of the time, and he knew we always kept more or less whisky out here. I never was much of a drinker, but Tuck hits it pretty hard —at times. Sam was a queer duck. Whisky kinda made him crazy. He'd sit here and drink whisky and smoke cigarettes, hardly sayin' a word. I never could quite figure him out."

Tuck Nash came in while they were eating. He was older than Taylor, slightly gray, hard-faced, with sharp eyes. Dissipation had left its mark on him, but he seemed hard as nails. He brought all the information about Sam Hope, which Mack Taylor already had.

"They're sayin' that Dusty Cole shot him," said Nash. "Heck, I suppose they'll blame everything on Dusty Cole from now on. There's never been any bad blood between Dusty and Sam, as far as I've heard."

"I believe they were friendly enough," agreed Henry.

"I wonder if Nick West wasn't workin' his imagination, when he said that Dusty and Sandy held up that stage," said Taylor.

"I am afraid not," replied Henry.

"You never believed that Dusty killed Peter Morris."

"No, I did not," Henry assured him. "As a matter of fact, gentlemen, I still do not believe it, regardless of the fact that Dusty turned highwayman."

"Funny about them gettin' the shipment from the Yellow Warrior," said Tuck Nash. "Like hittin' the OO in roulette, I reckon. Nobody knew about that gold bein' shipped."

"How is your gold vein coming along?" asked Judge.

"Kinda slow," replied Nash. "But one of these days we'll hit a pocket and be on easy street for a while. We're lucky to make wages, I reckon. This mine always was a pocket proposition. Rich today, broke tomorrow."

AFTER their meal Henry and Judge rode on to the Bar M Ranch. They found Laura Morris there, but Molly Hope was still in town. Laura had buried her own troubles in sympathy for Molly Hope. Still, she could not forbear questioning Henry about Dusty Morris and about the holdup.

"Miss Morris," Henry answered, "I'm afraid we must face the facts. Three men have identified Dusty and Sandy as the two men who robbed the stage."

"I can't believe it," she said. "Dusty was always honest."

"There is always a first time for a man to go bad," remarked Judge soberly.

"That must be a lot of satisfaction to Miss Morris," said Henry.

"What is the good of subterfuge?" asked Judge. "Three men identified Dusty and Sandy as the hold-up men."

"One frightened stage driver and two ignorant Mexicans," corrected Henry.

"The driver stated that Dusty talked with him, didn't he?" asked Laura.

"Yes, he did," nodded Henry. "I asked him if he identified Dusty's voice,

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and he said, 'It sounded like Dusty.' I asked him if he could give me any idea how Dusty 'sounded,' and he could not."

"That was not a fair test, Henry," protested Judge. "Suppose someone asked you how I sounded. How could you describe it?"

"I would merely say that it was terrible, and in most cases not fit for publication, Judge. That would be definite evidence to anyone who knew you at all."

"Thank you, sir," said Judge dryly.

Henry turned again to Laura.

"If there were only some way of finding out who had the appointment that night with your father," he said, "and why he drew fifteen thousand dollars from the bank at Scorpion Bend. . . . Unless he hid that money, the man who killed him also stole the money. And if the man who had the appointment with him did not keep it, why doesn't he come forth and tell us? Dusty Cole did not have the money."

"I am sure it was a terrible mistake —Dusty's conviction," said Laura. Bitterly she added. "The law convicted an innocent man, and made an outlaw of him. I'm as sure as anything that Judge Myers did not believe Dusty was guilty. And now they're saying that Henry Conroy turned Dusty loose. Why, that's ridiculous."

"Thank you so much, my dear young lady," said Henry warmly. "That warms the cockles of my heart."

"And extends to the end of your nose," added Judge. "The glow is evident."

In spite of her troubles Laura laughed.

"Juan Mendoza is back in the kitchen," she told him. "Won't you stay for supper? I need someone to talk with, and I'm afraid Molly won't be back tonight. We're having enchiladas—and there is lots of red wine."

"Viva la Juan Mendoza!" cheered Henry. "I have tasted the results of his culinary skill—and it is magnificent."

"Requiring, if I remember correctly," said Judge, "at least half a package of baking soda. As for me, I can digest rusty nails."

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed Henry. "At last I have found out what ails you, Judge. Iron and rust! Your system does not digest them—it merely absorbes them. Thank you, Miss Laura—we are honored by your invitation."

IT WAS after dark that evening, when Frijole Bill, Thunder and Lightning came to Tonto City in the buckboard. They tied the team in front of the sheriff's office, took a jug of prune liquor and walked into the office.

Oscar was there alone, slumped on the cot. He squinted up at them disconsolately.

"Hyah, Square-head," said Frijole. Frijole had been dallying with his own distillations before leaving the ranch. "Where-at is Henry and Judge?"

"Ay don't know, and Ay don't give dang," said Oscar.

"Feller, you look low," declared Frijole. "I'll betcha you'd have to climb thirty feet up a ladder to rub a snake's belly. What's ailin' yuh?"

"Ay have been yilted," declared Oscar.

"Jilted, eh? Left at the altar. Well, well!"

"Who de ha'al said anyt'ing about a halter."

"Excuse me," chuckled Frijole. "How about a snifter of the prune?"

"Ay could drink nitric acid and like it."

Oscar secured two cups. Thunder and Lightning always reserved their

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thirst for tequila, and refused prune whisky.

After the second cupful Oscar said:

"Ay am hortsick, Ay ta'al you, Free-holey. Ay yust paid sixty dollar for busting a boggy. Ay am t'rough. Love is not vort' it."

"I hope to tell yuh it ain't. I know *all* about it. Did I ever tell yuh about the time I almost married an Arapajo squaw? Talk about hard luck. Her old man wanted twenty-five ponies for her; so I got the twenty-five ponies and was all ready to make the trade, when her old man discovered that he already owned the twenty-five ponies. I never was worth a dang on readin' Injun brands.

"Well, sir, my dream of love was busted—along with all world records for about six miles. Fill up them cups, comrade. When I git to talkin' about love, it makes me dry."

Oscar blinked.

"Nels Swenson is ha'ar," stated Oscar. "He come to see Yosephine."

"Oh, oh! So that's the place where it squeaks, eh? Well, what are you moonin' for? You said you was through with her. Can't yuh never make up your mind, Oscar? Let her have Nels. I'd hate to see you marry a woman like her. Why, she's liable to take a hunk of wood and knock you cold any minute. I like the clingin' kind, myself."

"Yosephine is hord to beat," sighed Oscar.

"You mean she's hard to whip, don'tcha?"

"Yah, su-ure. Why you bring those dang Mexican vit you, Free-holey?"

"They're scared to stay home alone," chuckled Frijole. "Where is this Nels person?"

"In de hotal, Free-holey, courtin' vit Yosephine. Ay bet dey are in de oop-stairs parlor."

"Well, I'm shore surprised at you," declared Frijole. "Why don't yuh go up there and throw him out?"

"Ay vill ta'al you, Free-holey. Dis ha'ar yigger who owns de hotal told me that if Ay tried to dule around dere, he vill take his shotgun to me."

"Well, yuh can't blame him—much, Oscar. You've done busted up his hotel a couple times. When'd he tell yuh all this?"

"Yust a little vile ago."

"Oh, I see—yuh already had ideas. But—wait a minute! Yuh say the parlor is on that second floor? Huh! Well, why not climb right up them back steps onto that there balcony—and take him."

Oscar's eyes opened wide. "Yumpin' Yudas! Pour out some more of dat prune yuice, Free-holey."

"I hope Mr. Rickey, who owns that hotel, keeps on watchin' the front door," chuckled Frijole. "More'n one way to skin a cat."

"Oscar ees going fight a cat?"

"Ay am going fight Norvegian ship-horder," declared Oscar, swelling his mighty chest. "When Ay get t'rough vit him, every ship in Black River Flats vill be vearin' crape. Anodder drink, Free-holey."

"My leetle brodder," whispered Lightning, "theese ees no place for ver' peaceful *Mejicanos*. I'm theenk we better mak' snick in the dark."

"No, yuh don't sneak in no dark," growled Frijole. "We're the moral support and audience for the big Swede. Heck, yuh can't git hurt, jist watchin' a fight."

"Va'al," said Oscar, flinging his empty cup aside, "vat in ha'al are ve vaiting for? Ay feel for fight."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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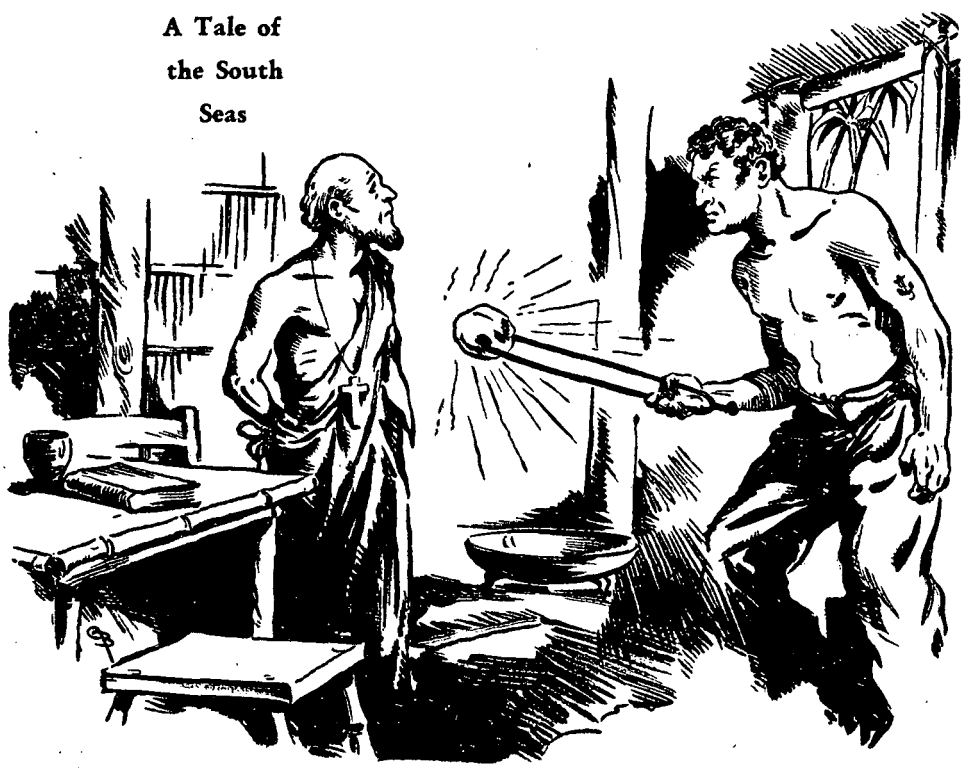
Song of the Fool

By JOHN G. PEARSOL

THE sky was gray, leaden, ominous. The wind blew with a sort of dismal, flat finality, and the force of it sent fierce white spray whipping across the bows of Shark Galin's outrigger. Shark Galin squatted in the stern, his wild black hair whipped back over his big round head. His black eyes glittered as the waves smashed against the oar in his huge hands. The rippling muscles on his giant arms writhed like round snakes under his naked brown skin as he held the insufficient boat steady, smashed through the heavy seas. Shark Galin was in a hurry to get away from Raiatea, the island where he'd gone on a mission for Father Pierre. He was in a hurry to get back to Te Mahana, where he could reach Father Pierre again. He was in a hurry to get away from Raiatea because there was a dead native back there who might cause Shark Galin a lot of trouble. A native who had been drunk when he'd come over from Father Pierre's island, Te Mahana, with a lustrous pearl entwined in his *pareu.*

That pearl held great promise for Shark Galin, to help him regain the things he'd lost a year ago. A schooner —pearls of his own—money—all locked in the strong box when his schooner, *Tiare,* had gone down in the

A Tale of the South Seas



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storm off Te Mahana, Father Pierre's island. Ever since that time, Shark Galin had stayed with Father Pierre. He had pretended to help him, while he planned for some way to get a schooner again, to trade in the islands, to cheat the natives, to smuggle opium, to steal and loot again.

Now all of this was in sight for Shark Galin. He had the native's pearl in his pocket, The native was dead, hidden in the rocks along Raiatea's stormy coast. Shark Galin had learned from that dying native's lips that this pearl had been Father Pierre's; that Father Pierre knew where many such pearls could be found. Even now that revelation dumfounded Shark Galin. Riches just before his eyes and he hadn't known it.

Salt spray slapped big Galin in the face. He cursed it as he licked his lips, wiped a huge paw up over his eyes, to push his straggly hair back over his hatless head.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" he muttered to himself. "Father Pierre has pearls, eh? I'd never guessed."

For a year he'd moped about this putrid island, doing the work of a boooming slave, wondering where he could steal enough money to get outfitted again. All this time Father Pierre had it. Pearls by the hundred!

Shark Galin's eyes glowed anew as he sighted the wind-whipped, palm-fringed shore of Te Mahana; the white-foamed surf racing up the sandy beach, reaching out with its clutching fingers, only to slip back, as though for a fresh start, to try to gain the hibiscus-studded ferns of the denser growth.

THE boat smashed forward. Shark Galin let go the halyard. He unshipped the mast, stowed it in the bottom of the boat. His great arms worked rhythmically as he pushed back his broad-bladed oar, rode the crest of a swift wave up onto the beach. He leaped over the outrigger's bow as it grated sharply in the sand. His great, bare feet sank into the sand as he drew the craft farther up on the beach with one tremendous heave of his great-muscled arms. His dungarees flapped on his legs in the wind, showed the huge size of the man as he strode up toward the *fare-hau* of Father Pierre's — the priest's house of split bamboo with its thatched roof.

The beach-roller thunder, the roar of the wind through the palms, seemed to talk of wealth to Shark Galin as he moved up the beach to the flower-sided path. Soon he would be on his own deck again. A trim schooner he'd have; a boat that would outsail any of these French Gunboats. A gun on his hip again, a crew of natives to jump when his booming voice roared at them. He'd be the power he used to be, on his own deck, taking what he wanted from whoever he pleased.

Father Pierre's dark-robed figure, his black skull-cap on his head, showed at the window as Shark Galin went to the house. Galin opened the door, let the bar fall into place again as he entered the room, where *tapa* mats covered the floor.

Father Pierre smiled a welcome that made his face somehow seem clean, holy, as though perhaps it somehow echoed the crucifix that hung suspended about his neck.

"You delivered the medicine, my son?" he asked Galin. "You gave the healing roots to Moana?"

Shark Galin nodded. He felt the hard, round pearl in his pocket, pressing against his leg. Riches . . .

"God bless you," Father Pierre said.

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"An errand of mercy for which you will be paid a hundredfold."

Galin felt that he should smile when Father Pierre said that. Sure he'd be paid! Not because he had carried the medicine roots to Moana, but because he'd pumped a drunken native; because he'd killed him to shut his mouth after he had talked.

Off in the far corner of the village, the voices of the natives, lifted in song, came to Shark Galin's ears. They were singing a song Father Pierre had taught them, a song to fit their childish minds, the words of it fitted to a hymn, telling how foolish a man must be who would not listen when the truth was spoken to him. The song of the fool, Galin contemptuously called it. The natives were fools. Father Pierre was a fool.

SHARK GALIN grunted. "Yeah," he said. "I'll be paid." That peculiar note in Shark Galin's voice swung Father Pierre about. Shark Galin took two swift steps forward, grasped the old man's hands, held them and bound them behind the old man's back with the cord Father Pierre wore about his robe at the waist. Father Pierre did not struggle. His face showed neither anger nor fear. He suffered it to be done unto him, without protest.

"Speakin' of payment," Shark Galin said now, pulling the pearl from his pocket. "Look this over. I took it from that houseboy you used to have. He was drunk. He said he swiped it from you. He said you knew where there was plenty more like it. What about that?"

Reluctantly, it seemed, Father Pierre took his eyes from Galin's face, looked down at the pearl, then up at Galin again. "The pearl was mine," he admitted slowly. "I knew the *Tamaiti* stole it from me."

"And you know where there's more?"

"I do, my son."

Shark Galin grinned, felt elation within him. "All right," he said. "Where?"

The old priest did not speak. Calmly, curiously, he studied Shark Galin's eyes. His composure infuriated Galin. It seemed to mock his strength. He reached out, tore the sacred cloth from the priest's breast. He tapped the bared skin, smooth and soft and hairless as a child's, with a stiff forefinger.

"I've heard of burning Christians," he said hoarsely. "I've never seen it done; but if you don't talk quick, we'll both see it done, here and now!"

"Your need must be great, my son," the old priest said softly. "Tell me your trouble and I will help you. If your cause is worthy I will give you all the pearls you need." His chest rose and fell a little irregularly—the only sign he gave of his knowledge that Galin was a pitiless animal.

Then Shark Galin made his great mistake. He forgot that Father Pierre loved these natives. He forgot that this old man would do anything to keep them from being further despoiled. Shark Galin forgot everything except the riches that were so nearly his.

"My need," he said. "It's a schooner—a swift craft to show a clean pair of heels to these gunboats. I need trade goods, and guns, and rum, and cloth. I need a crew. That's my need!"

Father Pierre shook his head as comprehension came to his faded old eyes. "Not for that," he said softly, calmly, yet so very positively.

Shark Galin cursed. His bare feet rasped on the mats as he paced across the room. He built a fire in the oven

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which, after the manner of the white man, was inside the house, instead of outside after the manner of the native. He squatted there, watched the round stones in the oven bottom heat. He took the tongs from beside the oven, lifted a sizzling stone from the red coals, and approached Father Pierre. He pushed that red-white stone against the old man's bare chest.

Father Pierre groaned softly, bit his lips; and his eyes closed while beads of sweat sprang out on his brow. Shark Galin took the rock away. He peered curiously at Father Pierre as the old man opened his eyes again and looked at him.

"Ready to talk?" he asked. "There's plenty of stones!"

Father Pierre shook his head. His pain-filled eyes seemed to hold no grudge against Shark Galin for inflicting the dreadful, searing pain. Only that calm confidence was there. That, and perhaps a little pity.

"No," he said, still softly, still positively.

A BIT uncertainly Shark Galin took another stone from the fire. He pressed it against the old man's chest, watched his face whiten, the sweat pop out on his brow again, like tiny buttons of gold on white parchment, glistening in the yellow light of the burning string of candle-nuts. But no sound escaped the old man's lips. No look of condemnation clouded his eyes when he opened them, to look so steadily at Shark Galin.

"Dam' you," Galin cursed, while the wind moaned outside. "Won't you *ever* talk? I'll burn th' heart right out of you!"

The old man shook his head again, smiled and closed his eyes weakly. "No pearls for your purpose, Shark Galin," he whispered, "Not for that! Only for a worthy cause."

Shark Galin cursed as he started the white hot stone forward again. But he didn't burn the priest again. He peered at him curiously. What kind of man was this? An old man. A weak man; suffering horribly, but smiling, and shaking his head. . . .

"You can't stand it," Galin warned finally. "You know you'll weaken after while. You might as well talk now. No human can stand what I'm ready to do to you!"

Father Pierre looked pityingly at the big, savage-visaged man above him.

"Some day, my son," he said softly, "you will understand that love can endure anything. Someday you will know that pain you endure for others is not pain for you. Go ahead. I am ready!"

Shark Galin raised the hot stone again, but stopped and held it just off Father Pierre's chest for a moment. Then he tossed it away. He cursed as he threw the tongs violently from him. What could he do with this fool who didn't know when he was hurt!

Then a smile gradually wreathed his face. He whirled, padded across the room into the corner, dug down into his bed and produced a belt with two holstered guns which he swung up and about his waist. These were the only things Shark Galin had salvaged from his wreck. Two guns loaded with cartridges he hoped would fire. Back in front of Father Pierre, Shark Galin grinned as he listened to the howl of the wind.

"All right," he said flatly. "I admit I'm licked. I admit this love you mentioned is stronger than hot stones. But I'm glad you mentioned it. If that's th' strongest thing you got, I'll just use it against you. Before very long you'll see th' natives you converted to your

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faith going back to the way they were before you came here. You'll see the sacrificial fires burning up on the High Place. You'll know that long pig is being eaten again; that your little children are going to eat each other again. How many pearls would you give to stop that!"

Father Pierre smiled knowingly.

"You could never do it," he said, confidently.

THE wind growled, moaned miserably at Shark Galin as he barged out of the door and made his way through the scattered huts where the candle-nut lights flickered fitfully in the wind. He pushed his way into the hut of Henui, a huge, muscular Raiatean native, a big-boned Kanaka of rebellious spirit.

"Aue, mountain man," greeted Henui as Galin pushed through the door, closed it against the wind. "The wind blows fiercely."

Shark Galin nodded, noticed that Henui's black eyes glowed at the sight of the two guns slung at his hips.

"It blows," said Galin in the native dialect, as he squatted down beside the calabashes of fish, *fei,* and *poi.* "It blows, but it blows no good. The Supreme God is angry."

Menui gave a superstitious roll to his eyes. His white teeth glistened through his parted lips, a pearly contrast to swarthy skin.

"Ea," he agreed. *"Tane,* the Supreme God, had been angry for long. The breadfruit withers on the trees; the *fei* is small and wrinkled. Soon, if the rain does come not, our bellies will be vrinkled with hunger."

Shark Galin nodded sagely.

"Hunger is the worst of all things," he said.

"Hunger and the dragon Moo."

"After hunger might even come the dragon Moo," said Shark Galin. "If a change is not made to please Tane."

Henui sighed. The wind moaned, sounded like the roll of distant thunder as it tore through the lofty coco palms.

"I, too, would be angry," Galin went on, "if I were neglected as long as Tane has been neglected. If I were the Supreme God, Tane, and had been neglected as Tane has been, I too, would wither the breadfruit and wrinkle the *fei.* And if my children worshipped the God of the white father, instead of myself, I would open the gates both under the sea, and above the sea, to let the dragon Moo come forth."

Henui's swarthy face paled. His eyes rolled anew. He moved over closer to the Candle-nuts that flickered so fitfully in the wind that blew through the flimsy split-bamboo hut.

Shark Galin moved his hands forward, made some senseless marks in the sand between his bare feet. He felt the stir of elation. How easy it was to move these child-minded natives with talk of their old Supreme God, Tane. The god of war, and sacrifice. The god whom the natives believed willed them to eat the flesh of humans. How quickly Father Pierre would come to terms if Galin could bring Tane to life. . . .

"It would be only just," Galin said musingly as he seemed to listen to the wind moan. "I am just, and I see the injustice of this thing that has been done. I see that you have forsaken your own gods to worship those of Father Pierre. I see where I, too, would be angry, were I a god who had been forsaken for such a long time."

Shark Galin reached into his pocket, produced the round pearl he had taken from the native he had killed.

"Much could be done," he went on, "if things were as they were—before

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the white God took the place of Tane." Galin rolled the pearl out before him, let it glisten in the yellow light.

"If the God of Father Pierre could be sent away, and Tane could come back, there could be the drinking of *ava,* the white man's rum, and even the eating of opium, the gum of pleasant dreams." Shark Galin shrugged, sighed. "But we talk of things that are not to be," he said regretfully. "For Father Pierre's God is still here, and Tane is forgotten. The voices singing in the *himene hau* are for the ears of another God, not for the ears of Tane."

Henui sighed, seemed to be unable to take his eyes from the pearl between Galin's great feet. Shark Galin traced some fantastic patterns in the sand about it.

"I sorrow for your people," he said. "Even I, a white man, can sorrow for those doomed to suffer hunger, and perhaps to feel the wrath of neglected Tane. There should be some way to change it."

Henui sighed tremulously.

"Ea," he agreed, "there should be. But there is not."

Galin shrugged again.

"Perhaps it is not time," he said. "Perhaps I have spoken too early. Perhaps when the Supreme God has exhausted all his patience he will give a sign. If, perchance, that sign should be given, I would say that a meeting should be held, up near the caves on the mountain Mauite. If that should happen, perhaps both you and I can do the things we wish to do. I, too, tire of Father Pierre and the ways of his God."

Shark Galin looked up at Henui, continued. "I wish to know where more pearls like this one can be found. Father Pierre knows where they are. But he will not tell. He does not want your people to drink rum, nor to eat opium gum. But if I could hear the father tell where these pearls could be found, I would help your people. I would give them half of all the pearls."

Henui looked down at the pearl again. The wind howled more dismally. Shark Galin rose.

"Perhaps it would be well to listen for a sign," he suggested. "Perhaps if Tane speaks it will mean that he wishes those things to happen that I have mentioned here."

Shark Galin stepped out into the night again. He pushed through the wind to a hut behind Father Pierre's. He stole into the hut, picked up a log drum, its ends covered with stretched hide. He crept out into the night again and grinned as he made his way through the dense undergrowth, enroute to the High Place, the deserted shrine of pagan worship; that rock-built pyramidlike altar high on the peak of Mount Mauite, where the natives had sacrificed their victims before the coming of Father Pierre.

Shark Galin's naked, bronze-skinned torso glistened with sweat as he climbed upward, through the tearing wind, to come to a halt near the High Place. His great chest heaved as he put down the drum, picked up an ironwood stick with knotted end, started a rhythmic pounding on the drum-head. A savage expression crept into his big-boned face as he sent the throbbing notes booming down toward the village, to remind those peaceful dwellers of the god of an earlier day; a day when this stone altar ran red with the blood of human sacrifice.

Fiercely Shark Galin swung his ironwood club. The deep notes boomed out, went throbbing down into the village. Shark Galin knew what those pulsing tones were doing. They were sending

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tingles of superstitious fear through the simple people down there. That savage rhythm was making their hearts beat in the same wild tempo as the booming beats of the drum; even as it made Shark Galin's heart pump fiercely, and caused his eyes to glow with the terrible light of wicked fires.

FOR half an hour, until his arms ached, Galin pounded the drum. He stopped, lifted it, carried it down the mountain slope. He kept from the main path, scrambled across streams, smashed through the vine-barricaded undergrowth. He crept through the village again, stole up to the hut behind Father Pierre's, and hid the drum. Shark Galin saw swift, furtive figures flitting through the village. He sensed a tense, fierce undercurrent that was everywhere. He saw a string of dark, glistening shapes as they started up the trail that led to the High Place. Natives creeping along under the low, scurrying clouds, going toward the worship place of Tane, the god of old. Shark Galin grinned savagely. He had done it! It was working! Pearls . . . riches . . . power . . .

Shark Galin hurried, tore through the brush again, made his way swiftly up to the caves near the High Place, where he had suggested to Henui that a meeting be held. He squatted at the entrance to a cave, quieted his tortured breathing, waited till he saw the huge form of Henui coming through the trees. Henui was ahead of a group of other natives. They came forward cautiously, and Shark Galin grinned as he watched them. They were scared. They had the shakes, all of them. They'd do anything he suggested.

Galin rose from his place in the shadows. The natives scattered, started to run. All but Henui, the Raiatean. He stood his ground, called out to Galin. "A sign," he said. "A sign of which we spoke. Did you too, hear it, mountain man?"

"Ea," said Galin. "Surely. I heard and I came to see if indeed it was Tane, giving his consent to all those things of which he spoke. Has he spoken to you?"

"He did not speak," said Henui. "But it must be so. We have agreed to chase away the God of the white father and sing to Tane alone."

"And what of the other things?" asked Galin. "Did you learn from the white father where more pearls can be had? Have you thought of that, so you will have money for rum and opium?"

"Ea," Henui nodded. "In that too, we are agreed. But we bring evil tidings also. A taboo has been placed upon you, mountain man. Those who will still remain faithful to the God of the white fathers have placed it upon you. For a burning, they say. It is a long taboo. A taboo in which you will waste away, wither like the breadfruit now withers on the trees. You will finally die."

Henui uttered that confidently, fearfully.

Shark Galin gave a great booming laugh. But suddenly the laugh stilled in his massive throat. *Taboo!* It *was* a deadly thing. They *did* pray men to death. Shark Galin had seen them do it, on other islands. He had seen men die from the taboo. Then he chuckled. The taboo was not for white men. It was only for the natives. Their own superstitious fear killed them.

"Taboo!" he said scornfully, then touched his naked chest. "A taboo cannot harm me!"

SHARK GALIN watched the natives. His scorn of the taboo seemed not to impress them at all. They

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had faith in it. Taboo! What if it *did* work! The thought angered Galin. It couldn't work, he argued with himself. It was impossible.

"Come with me," he commanded. "We go to the village. We shall make the white father tell where we may find pearls. This taboo matters not to me. We shall tell the white father that his God is replaced by Tane."

"*Aue,* and we shall make *long pig* of the white father," said Henui as he fell in beside Galin. "We shall roast him to please our god."

Shark Galin squinted craftily up at the nearly obscured moon, concealed behind scurrying clouds.

"*Ea,*" agreed Galin. "Sacrifice the white father. But not now. Wait till the moon is big and round; until the eye of Tane is wide open so that he might better see the thing that you do."

"That too would be well," agreed Henui. "We shall cook him when the moon is round."

Shark Galin smiled as he marched along. Father Pierre would be sacrificed when the moon was full. That would be two weeks at the least; that would leave plenty of time for Shark Galin to persuade Father Pierre that the loss of his pearls would be better than to have his natives revert to cannibalism. Galin grinned. The joke of it was that Father Pierre wouldn't know that his beloved children would revert to their old customs anyway. Now they'd do it, whether he told Shark Galin the location of the pearls or not. They'd cook and eat the man they had loved. But that was the way of native minds.

The yellow lights of the village came into view. Shark Galin stopped. Suddenly he felt peculiar. A sharp pain smote him in the pit of his stomach. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow as an awful agony clutched his vitals. He felt sick. He *was* sick! He was choking, like a strong hand was about his throat. The fearful thought that the taboo had struck him came to Galin and made his heart pound fast.

Henui peered curiously at him, while the other natives stopped behind them.

"We do not go on?" asked Henui.

That terrible agony in Shark Galin's stomach made his voice hoarse. Only by tremendous will did he keep from doubling up.

"You go while I stay," he said. "It is you, not I, who have forsaken a god. To prove your worth go on alone. Tell the white father of your decision. Show Tane that you are men who stand by themselves, not women who need a stick on which to lean. Show Tane that you do not need a white man to guide you, neither the white father, nor me, even though I have shown you the way. Tane would frown upon a white man leading his children."

Henui seemed to grow in stature. His white teeth flashed. "That is true," he said. "We shall do it ourselves."

"And from the lips of some of those who still follow the white father's God," Shark Galin went on, "you may perhaps discover the hiding place of many pearls, half of which shall be yours."

"For rum and sweet gum opium," reminded Henui longingly.

"*Ea* for rum and opium," assured Shark Galin. "Or even for guns, so that you will not have to fight with the spear and club."

SHARK GALIN leaned weakly against the rough trunk of a coconut tree as Henui led the natives on. His stomach writhed. He was violently sick. He wondered if he had eaten something poisonous. Or perhaps it was

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a cramp caused by that cold water splashing on his bare belly when he was so violently hot. But Shark Galin kept thinking about the taboo. Taboo made you sick. It choked your throat. It poisoned the food you ate. Slowly but surely you died. Shark Galin cursed. What was he thinking of anyway? They couldn't work a taboo on him! Not on a *white* man.

He listened to the sounds that floated out to him from the village. There was shouting. He heard vile names being flung at Father Pierre. Insults to the white God. Shouted challenges to the faction loyal to Father Pierre, all borne to Shark Galin on the wings of the whipping wind. Through the trees, backed by the flickering lights of the village, the moving forms of the natives danced crazily in his vision. The shrill cries of conflict came to him. The glimmer of whirling war-clubs showed in scintillating arcs in the pale light. He heard the thud of those clubs on heads. Cries of triumph, among which the deep voice of Henui rose above the others, came to Shark Galin as he stood there, sick, dizzy, some inexplainable thing stealing the starch from his legs and making jelly of his backbone.

His belly writhed again. He bent over, vomited violently. Taboo, he thought as he straightened. Then he cursed himself for a fool. It couldn't be taboo. But he knew it *was* taboo. He knew he was under that mysterious spell cast on men by natives. But he wouldn't admit it, even to himself. It wouldn't do.

With a mighty effort he straightened, threw off that sickening dizziness. He couldn't let Henui see that he was sick. He couldn't let these natives think their taboo was working. It *wasn't* a taboo. His stomach was upset, that was all. But the fear in his heart told him it was something worse than that. *Taboo* . . .

"Mountain man," called Henui's voice. "We have won. You were right. Tane was with us. Come now and ask the white father the secret of the pearl lagoon."

Shark Galin stepped out through the trees. His face twisted into a grin as he went up to where Father Pierre stood, his black skull cap gone, his crucifix torn from his neck, standing before the grouped natives. But Father Pierre had that same calm expression of sufference on his face that had been there when Shark Galin had burned him.

"Now," Shark Galin said in English, a language the natives could not understand, "Now what about it? Here are your loving children, all ready to sing their songs to Tane. All your work these past twenty years is gone up in a night. They're all set to make long pig of a French priest. Which will it be, Papa Pierre? Will it be long pig or pearls? A word from me and I can bring 'em back to you just as easy as I took 'em away!"

A great pain showed in the white-haired old man's eyes—a suffering greater than when he had been burned —and Shark Galin marveled at it.

"You force me to choose between two evils," said Father Pierre haltingly, his English imperfect. "Which, I wonder, is the greatest?"

GALIN had that agonizing twinge in the pit of his stomach again. He forced a laugh to hide it, to conceal the quiver of fear that chilled his vitals; that made him know taboo had him in its insidious clutches.

"That's easy," Galin argued. "Your best shot is to tell. Then I take a boat an' run. When you're rid of me you can

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work on these natives again. The other way . . ." Shark Galin shrugged. Henui pushed forward again, peered curiously at Father Pierre, at Shark Galin.

"Will he speak?" Henui asked in the native dialect. "Will we have rum and opium and guns?"

Old Father Pierre's eyes flashed as Henui spoke in the native tongue. He smiled that calm smile again that taunted Shark Galin.

"You'll never get them," he said, so calmly confident that Galin wondered.

Shark Galin raised his hand to strike the old man. He lowered it again.

"Take him away," he told Henui. "He speaks only insults to Tane, your god. Perhaps in a day, a week, or even a month, he will speak of the pearls."

"Before that time he will be a sacrifice to Tane," promised Heuni ominously.

Shark Galin watched them lead Father Pierre away, wondered if he could curb their zeal in making sacrifice to Tane for long enough for Father Pierre to talk. He watched the beaten members of the village stealing back to their huts, squatting at their doors like dark-faced mummies, whipped, subdued, but still loyal to Father Pierre. Henui led his victorious crew over to the *himene* house—the religious house where songs were sung to Tane. Galin heard their voices raised in song as they sat cross-legged on the ground, swaying to the rhythm of the native chant.

Shark Galin smiled as he listened. Father Pierre would hear those songs too. It would tear the heart from the old priest to know that his life's work was being undone. He'd weaken soon, surely. But Galin's smile was sickly. His face was pasty. That sickening gnawing was in his vitals again. That whispering, insinuating voice was telling him that the taboo was working on him. Shark Galin, the mighty, would become weak. He would die . . .

Galin stood there seeing the natives who watched him with their round eyes, searching for a sign that their taboo prayers were working. He held his great head up, his shoulders back, when he wanted to bend double with pain. Great beads of sweat sprang out again on his brow. But he marched past them, a scowl on his face, a careless swagger in his long-strided walk as he made his way back into Father Pierre's house. He'd never let them see he was sick. But he was sick—pain in his insides . . .

Then Shark Galin doubled with agony. He gagged. His throat felt as though a tight string was about it. It was agony to breathe. He dropped to the floor, lay there, nausea shaking him; his great body shivering with a terrible sickness that somehow seemed unreal.

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HE LAY there, listening to the shouted songs that rose from the *himene* house. All night long, until the rising sun came up like a great ball from out of the sea, Shark Galin's mind was clouded by visions of mummy-faced natives squatted at the doors of their huts, watching him for signs of the taboo, the curse they prayed would kill him.

Then he rose, peered through the bamboo slits. The natives were still there. Galin made his way on shaky legs to the door that led to the room where Father Pierre lay near the center post, unbound, beside the calabashes of *poi*. Funny, how weak he was. Funny how his legs shook, his hands trembled.

"Hear 'em last night?" Galin asked the old man. "Hear 'em singing to

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Tane? You better talk! I don't know how long I can hold 'em off, now that they're good an' started. The longer they go, the harder it'll be to stop 'em. But if you talk right now I can swing 'em off this stuff right way."

"To fill them with rum and opium!" said Father Pierre scathingly. "I'd rather die fifty deaths than have that happen!"

Shark Galin grinned confidently, turned and left the room. But he didn't feel confident. That damnable gnawing was in his belly again. It paled his face, made him sweat. He hid in the house so no one could see him. He ate some breadfruit, some *fei,* but as soon as it touched his stomach it sickened him, and he felt shaky, panicky, as he staggered about.

He huddled in the house all day. He tried to eat again at dark, but he sickened again. He staggered in to where Father Pierre was imprisoned, glared at him like a wild animal.

"You think I'm sick too, don't you?" he asked harshly. "You think their taboo is working. You think I'm gonna die! Well, you're wrong! There ain't any such thing as taboo working on a white man!"

He stood there glaring for a moment, then bolted from the room. Why was he always thinking about taboo? This couldn't be the taboo! This was something different.

"Just my imagination," he muttered to himself. "I think too much about it."

Galin rummaged through Father Pierre's effects, found a bottle of cognac. He drank half a quart without stopping, waited for that delicious, comfortable glow it would bring. But strangely, while he waited, there was no delicious glow. Instead, a violent cramp hit his belly, as if a giant's sledge-hammer had been smashed against it. He bent double with the agony of it, reached out and grasped the bottle by the neck, smashed it against the center pole.

"I went too long without a drink," he told himself. "I been a year off booze an' try to drink a whole bottle!"

But Shark Galin knew it wasn't that. This was something else. This was something deadly. This was *taboo!* Galin staggered over to the wall, peered through the slit bamboos. His eyes were haggard as he watched the natives out there, squatting around the house, watching it with such intent stares; their eyes shining with purpose, their faces sober. They were praying—praying—praying—for Shark Galin to die.

Shark Galin whipped a gun from his holster, aimed it through a bamboo slit. He dropped the gun back in its holster again. He paced nervously, shakily, about the room, stopped at every round to look in at Father Pierre who sat there, calm, confident, even when he knew he was to be killed and eaten! What was that Father Pierre had said? Love? . . . Some day you'll know that love is the greatest of all things . . .

ANOTHER day and Shark Galin was wan, pale, haggard-eyed. He kept peering out at the natives, still squatted outside, somber, bright-eyed figures, waiting for him to die. Now he had to crawl and his head wabbled crazily as he made his way to Father Pierre's door, to peer dully in at the aged priest.

"You gonna talk?" he asked mumblingly. Then he turned and crawled away again, seeming not to care for an answer.

Another day. Still another. Henui, the Raiatean leader, came into the house, looked at Shark Galin squatted

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there like a huge crab, watching Father Pierre.

"The moon is round," Henui said to Galin, appearing not to notice his sunken eyes, his haggard face, the flabby flesh that hung loosely on his big bones. "The eye of Tane is open wide. It is time for long pig."

Shark Galin shook his head, made it wag back and forth like a huge, cumbersome thing on his skinny, insufficient neck.

"It is not time," he mumbled. "The white father has not spoken."

The giant Raiatean nodded positively. "It is time," he stated. "Tane had spoken to us. He wants the blood of Father Pierre!"

Galin took a gun from his holster, kept it in his lap so Henui could not see the shake in his hands.

"It is not time," he mumbled again. "The white father must not die until he speaks."

Henui looked at the gun in Galin's hand. His eyes seemed to mock Galin as he looked at the man who used to be the strongest man in the Islands. Henui smiled as he looked at Galin's withered body; took care to let Galin see his eyes noticing the wreck of a man before him. Then he backed out the door with that knowing smile on his lips.

"Taboo," muttered Shark Galin as he watched Henui go. "He thinks it's got me!"

He reached up with his hand, thumped his pitifully skinny chest with a closed fist. "But it ain't got me," he talked to himself. "Not me! Not Shark Galin!"

But Shark Galin knew he was a liar. Shark Galin was done for.

NIGHT came again but Galin knew he could not sleep. If he slept Henui would come and take Father Pierre away to sacrifice him. Galin dragged a high stool in from the other room, crawled up on it and sat there like a huge, wabbling monkey, with a gun in his hand. Now, if he dozed, he would fall. If he fell, he would awaken. . . .

The whispering of the natives came in to his ears; the rustling of the vines sounded as they tried to peer into the hut, to see if Shark Galin was dead. Galin tried to make his grin wolfish, as he'd always done. But it was a failure. He tried to tell himself that he'd fool them; that there wasn't any taboo. But that was a failure too. There was a taboo. Shark Galin would die. He was dying now.

Slowly, the night passed. Galin dozed. He toppled from the stool, awoke on the floor and waved the gun threateningly at the natives who crowded in the door, their lighted torches throwing a dancing yellow glare on their surprised faces.

"Thought I was done, eh?" he muttered to them in English, shaking his wobbly head while he squatted there like a huge-framed crab, his grinning face a gargoyle. "Thought I was dead. But I'm not dead. Go away."

They didn't know what he said. But they backed away from the gun. The hut was silent again. Galin climbed up on the stool. The whispering came to his ears. That foolish song from the temple of Tane came to mock him again. The song of the fool. The song about the foolish one who listened not to words of wisdom. Maybe Shark Galin was a fool. Maybe he should believe Father Pierre. Maybe love *was* stronger than anything else on earth. Maybe love had made Father Pierre a stronger man than Shark Galin. Maybe Shark Galin was wrong and Father Pierre was right. Then greed

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caused pearls, power and lust to fill Shark Galin's mind again. A boat and guns and a crew of hellions. He'd have them yet!

One hour slipped by. Two. Shark Galin nodded again. He toppled off the stool. Weakly, dazedly, on the floor, he tried to reach out, to crawl back up on the stool again. But weakness won, and his head sank back. Deeply, he slept, while dark shadows slithered through the room, while bare feet padded across the mats.

Those soft sounds made Shark Galin open his eyes again. Dumbly, he looked about the empty room, made light by the moon that sifted its light through the open door. He wagged his head stubbornly, pushed himself up on hands and knees, crawled forward through the village while sounds of fighting drifted to him from afar. Henui and his followers were taking Father Pierre to sacrifice; Father Pierre's loyal faction was trying to prevent it.

Slowly, like a crab, his hands raw, his knees bleeding, Shark Galin crawled on. Father Pierre was going to die. But Father Pierre couldn't die! It wasn't time. He hadn't talked. He hadn't told where Shark Galin could get pearls. Funny, how brave that crazy old Frenchman was. Funny, how he'd looked so calmly out of his eyes at those red-hot stones. Perhaps he'd look calm when they made ready to sacrifice him. Perhaps he wouldn't care when they made ready to eat him. Maybe this love he talked of made him that way. Maybe it was stronger than all things. Maybe it was stronger than taboo. . . .

Weakly, while he crawled along, Shark Galin unbuckled his gun belt, let his guns drop in the mud. They bothered him, and he wouldn't need them now.

"White man," a voice came out of the shadows while Galin crawled along in the mud. "Mountain man."

"Begone," muttered Shark Galin hoarsely.

"Taboo will kill you!" came the voice from the dense brush again. "Even now you are no longer a man. You crawl like a turtle in the mud; and soon you will die. But before you die there is something the good white father wishes you to know. Will you listen, mountain man?"

Shark Galin stopped. He lay there in the mud and panted. *Ea,* he would listen, Why not? He must rest. He could listen while he rested. He could do nothing else but listen.

"Ea," he muttered hoarsely.

"The white father will shortly die," the native's voice came again. "But he talked to me before Henui wrested him from us. He asked that I tell you he held no malice toward you. He asked that I plead with you to forego your evil ways. He asked that I plead with you to use your strength for good instead of evil. For Father Pierre does not know that you will die. He does not believe that taboo will kill. He believes that you will be well again, and believing this, he asked me to plead with you. He asked that I say that he was glad to die to save us from evil, just as the One who saved the world by death on the cross was glad to die. That is all, mountain man. I have delivered my message. Now I will watch you die. You are a dog, and perhaps you will yelp when death draws near."

SHARK GALIN lay there and listened. There was no sound, but he knew the native was there, waiting, watching till a dog would die. Dog . . . Maybe he was a dog. But he wouldn't yelp when death came. Or would he?

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What would taboo do to a man? Could it take his heart and make it yellow, as it made jelly out of strong muscles? And love—the love that Father Pierre had said was strong. What of it? Father Pierre was on his feet, facing death calmly, while Shark Galin groveled in the mud!

Funny how things worked out. Funny how Shark Galin remembered the calm in Father Pierre's eyes. Funny how he remembered him saying that pain he endured for others was not pain for him. Strange, how queerly it affected Shark Galin to have that native tell him that Father Pierre was glad to die; that he held no malice—no malice toward the man who had tortured him, the man who was causing him to be eaten. Funny . . . Funny as hell, how some men were. . . .

All his life Shark Galin had fought. He had never thought of men as being good and bad—they were merely opponents and from all of them he had always expected the same reactions. Men, in Shark Galin's experience, were like he was. They reacted definitely to gold, to rum, to women, and they never turned the other cheek.

So he was a dog. Funny too, how Shark Galin couldn't forget that. He was a dog, he guessed. A dog for burning Father Pierre. A dog for causing him to be eaten.

"I am a dog, truly," Shark Galin muttered and was surprised that he had said it aloud.

"*Ea,* that is true," came the voice from the shadows.

"A dog and a fool," said Shark Galin. "For wealth I have betrayed a man who would save me with his dying breath. Only a dog that is mad will do that. Only a dog snaps at the hand which offers it food."

"Wisdom comes to you, mountain man," said the unseen native. "But it comes too late."

"*Ea,* too late," muttered Galin. "For if it were not for this hurt that gnaws at my belly—if it were not for this thing that makes my arms weak when they should be strong, I would save the white father."

The silence was deep, then the native spoke again. "Why?" asked the native. "Why would you save him?"

Shark Galin shook his head dumbly, dazedly, weakly. Truly, he did not know. Something, something about a man dying on a cross and being glad; something about Father Pierre dying up there and being glad, because he thought it would keep harm from his converts. That, maybe, or maybe something about Father Pierre saying he held no malice. He did not know. He could not rationalize the change in himself. He only knew that he *had* changed and that his new purpose was steady and sure and that the knowledge of it gave him a peace he had never known before.

"I only know it is true," Galin muttered. "Why, I do not know."

That deep silence came again. The native was there, watching. Shark Galin was there, dying, weak, sick, dizzy.

"There is no taboo upon you, mountain man," the native's voice came suddenly. "I now have lifted it. You are stronger. You are well again. That is true."

Shark Galin squinted his eyes in puzzlement. He listened some more, but heard nothing. He saw nothing. But gradually, miraculously, he felt something, He felt the shake leave his hands. He looked down at them, and they were steady. He reached out and picked up a stick from the mud. He grasped it and his fingers curled about

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it. His fingers were strong. Fearfully, lest he should be wrong, Shark Galin exerted his strength, bended his hands against the stick. It cracked, broke, and Shark Galin's heart beat high, tumultuously, within his breast. Taboo . . . There was none. It was lifted. He was strong!

But was he strong, Shark Galin wondered, because the taboo had been lifted, or because of his determination to save Father Pierre. He did not know; he only knew that he felt stronger and more purposeful now than he had ever felt before in his life.

Slowly, he rose to his feet, and he could stand! He took a step and he could walk! He hurried and he could run. He ran for the sheer joy of running. He wanted to yell, to shout. He smashed through the brush. He crashed through the vines. He climbed the steep, rock-strewn slope of Mauite mountain and felt the sing of swift, fierce elation in his blood. Strong again! Shark Galin, strong, strongest man in the islands! Like the Crusaders must have felt, he felt now. There was a force in him that would not be denied and he realized that never before in his life had he been happy—not as he was now.

THEN suddenly Galin stopped. Up aheadof him now he could see the two groups of natives. He saw Henui, and saw that Henui had Father Pierre in his power. He saw the faction loyal to Father Pierre cowering away from the larger group, beaten, subdued, afraid. Shark Galin stood still. His heart beat fast, but not with exertion now. It beat high with excitement, with the sheer lunacy of the thing Galin knew suddenly he was going to do. He was going to do the thing he had said he would do. The man on the cross . . . the white father who was glad . . . the love that was strong. . . . The calmness in an old priest's eyes . . . All of those things? One of them? Shark Galin didn't know.

Then there was a slithering sound in the bush. Like a momentary shadow the native who had talked to him just now appeared then vanished. But vanishing, he had left something in Galin's sweaty hand—the gun he'd dropped in the mud back there. A glance told him that the cartridges had been removed; the loyal natives did not trust him enough to give him bullets. But the steel gun-butt would serve as a club—perhaps the empty weapon would frighten Henui and his long-pig party from their purpose.

Slowly, but purposefully, Shark Galin strode forward. How great it was to be strong again! How fine to be big, to be sure, to know he was mighty. Confident, swaggering in the knowledge of his strength, Shark Galin made his way to the faction loyal to Father Pierre. He heard mutters, but listened not at all. He saw the stares of Henui's men, but turned to look at the sullen faces of those loyal to Father Pierre. Shark Galin was now one with these faithful people. He knew now the hidden strength that made them stay with Father Pierre.

"A miracle has come," he said. "The taboo has been lifted from me. My muscles are no longer weak. My mind is no longer dazzled by the sight of riches. It is filled with the thoughts of the things our white father has taught us. I am ready to fight for him. I am ready to lead you. Are you ready to follow?"

They looked at Galin. They hesitated. Then they roared and swept forward, and Shark Galin leaped ahead of them like a great, high-bodied,

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super-man, and swept toward the group behind Henui. Clubs flashed in the light of the moon. Spears glittered in the pale light. Shrill cries rose high to startle the night. And they met like two great bodies of irresistible force, smashing, striking, thrusting, with Shark Galin's great arm working like a piston, raising and smashing down on the heads of screaming natives—

A spear flashed through the air, struck Shark Galin in the side. He gasped with pain, reached down and broke off the haft and kept on fighting. Father Pierre's men were winning. Henui and his followers were falling back. Back, farther and farther, Henui and his men were pushed. Father Pierre was alone now. His loyal subjects came to him. The plateau was swept clean. Father Pierre was hurried away. The plateau was quiet. No sound stirred the night, and Shark Galin looked dazedly about and saw that he was alone. Father Pierre was gone. They had taken him back to the village. Henui and his men were in full flight.

Shark Galin staggered now as he walked slowly back down the mountain slope. He felt the warm blood running down his side. He felt weakness assail him again. But he knew this weakness, and he smiled at it. This was weakness from the loss of blood. This was a clean, glorious weakness. A weakness that made Shark Galin hold his head up high; that made a smile that was almost triumphant touch his lips.

On down the slope he went. He fell, and lay there for a moment. He tried to push himself up straight, then knew it would be no use. He propped himself against a tree. His eyes were dimming, and his head was whirling, and the mud was mixed with blood as he sat there and waited. A stir in the brush made him turn his eyes. A native stepped out and Shark Galin knew by his voice that this was the same native who had talked to him before and had lifted the taboo from him.

"You will perish, mountain man?" the native asked, concern now in his voice.

Shark Galin nodded. "I will perish," he said.

The native squatted down beside him. "I will stay by your side," he said. "It is not well for a man to die alone. I will comfort you. When your heart bleeds, my heart shall bleed also. When the breath leaves your body, the white Savior shall take you in his arms and carry you to Paradise, for you have truly earned it."

Shark Galin rested his head back against the tree. He listened to the night-sounds: the birds, the wind in the trees, and the faint chant of the song that drifted up to him from the village. The song of the fool, it was. Funny, now that it was not ironic to him. Funny, it was true. A man was a fool not to listen to the words of truth. Strange, how Shark Galin knew that this, his own death, was well; that he, Shark Galin, would never have stayed good long. A month, a year, then pearls and wealth and power and greed would have tugged at him again.

It was better this way. There was that something about being glad to die that Father Pierre had said. There was a lot of comfort in the native being here. His heart was bleeding when Shark Galin's heart was bleeding! When the breath left Shark Galin's body, the Savior would take him in his arms and carry him to Paradise! Father Pierre's teaching . . . how strangely it comforted. . . .

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MEN of DARING

by Stookie Allen

COURAGE
IT WAS THE WORLD WAR—··· DE SEVERSKY, A YOUNG RUSSIAN NOBLEMAN, FLYING FOR THE IMPERIAL NAVY WAS SHOT DOWN IN HIS FIRST FIGHT. HIS OBSERVER WAS KILLED. HE HIMSELF LOST A LEG. A LESS COURAGEOUS MAN WOULD HAVE QUIT. DE SEVERSKY CRAWLED OUT OF THE HOSPITAL, WENT BLAZING OVER THE LINES AND IN A FEW MONTHS HAD DOWNED 13 ENEMY PLANES! SOON HE WAS MADE COMMANDER OF ALL PURSUIT AVIATION ON THE BALTIC SEA.
MAJOR ALEXANDER DE SEVERSKY
BY SPECIAL PERMISSION OF THE CZAR HE CONTINUED HIS FLYING WITH AN ARTIFICIAL LIMB. EMPEROR NICHOLAS LATER PRESENTED HIM WITH A GOLD SWORD AND MADE HIM A KNIGHT OF THE ORDER OF ST. GEORGE AND ST. STANISLAV.
WHEN HIS GOVERNMENT WAS OVERTHROWN BY THE REDS HE MADE A THRILLING ESCAPE AND BECAME EUROPE'S GREATEST STUNT FLYER, TOURING ALL THE CAPITALS.
COMING TO AMERICA, HE TURNED TO PLANE DESIGNING— PICTURED HERE IS HIS FAMOUS SEVERSKY AMPHIBIAN. WITH IT HE SET A NEW SPEED MARK FOR AMPHIBIANS. IT IS CAPABLE OF 260 MILES AN HOUR! DE SEVERSKY IS NOW A MAJOR IN THE U.S. ARMY RESERVE CORPS AND HIS FACTORY SUPPLIES THE U.S. ARMY WITH MANY OF ITS FAST PURSUIT PLANES.
IT LANDS ON ICE, SNOW, LAND OR WATER!

A True Story In Pictures Every Week

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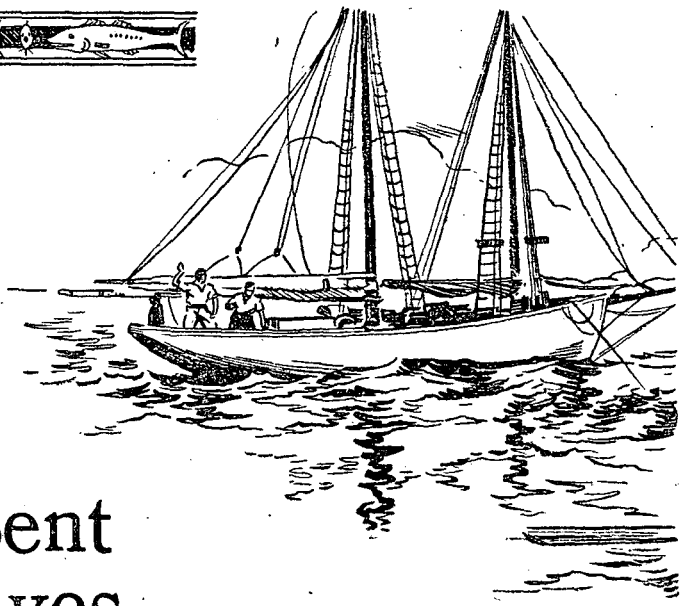
A Complete Novelet of High Adventure in the Caribbean



Hell-Bent For Aves

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

Author of "Lords of the Roaring Road," "Galahad Stuff," etc.

I

THE radio message from Havana looked like no more than a piece of rather doubtful news to young John Tremaine. He didn't know, then. Not even the vagrant echo of a pistol shot as yet unfired assailed his ears in warning of what was to come.

In the spotless and newly-varnished cockpit of the schooner *Dawn* under the awning intended to tame the blistering, vertical Venezuelan sun that hits Puerto Cabello like many spears it was too hot to read radio messages. But Tremaine read it anyhow:

ANYBODY CRAZY ENOUGH TO BUY A WINDSHIP AS SPECULATION NEEDS NURSE STOP ONLY POSSIBLE CUSTOMER KNOWN TO ME IS JOHNNY AXTELL DUE ISLAND OF MARTINIQUE FEW DAYS STOP HE'S CRAZY TOO STOP GOOD LUCK STOP ALSO GOOD NIGHT.

HARRISON.

"The devil of it is he didn't send it collect," Tremaine explained to his mate and co-speculator, Mark Paul. "That means old Harrison seriously thinks I might unload it on Axtell."

Paul, six-feet-six of gristle, a man of many occupations, occasionally including beachcoming, was hunched up over the note, dissecting it slowly.

"Who is this bird Harrison, sir?"

"The smartest yacht-broker this side of City Island," Tremaine said. "I worked for him once. His motto was 'Never let a customer get away.'"

"Well, sir, we ain't customers but if we don't get away from here that Venezuelan oil king is going to change his mind and want his schooner back," Mark said. "O' course I only got eight hundred and sixty dollars invested in her but if I had eight thousand, a motor yacht and a jawbone note for five thousand tied up like you I'd sell her before she needs more paint."

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He nodded morosely and slapped his flat hip pocket. "Because there ain't going to be any more paint," he said. "You cleaned me plenty when I bought this job of mate off you."

Tremaine stood up. "We're selling her to this Johnny Axtell," he announced. "Somewhere I've heard of that lad. A playboy, if he's the chap I'm thinking of. I'll go ashore and awaken these *sacré* port officials to the terrific labor of clearing us."

The formalities took time, and also the last of their money. But Harrison's was the only tip that much energetic writing and radioing about the schooner had brought John Tremaine. *Dawn* was either a tremendous bargain or a cataclysmic flop. Though he knew the ex-owner of *Dawn,* who was tired of her, regarded his note as a paper of dubious value John Tremaine figured it as a good security.

Having nothing but his honesty left, after various ventures in the tropics, Tremaine was determined to hang onto that.

NEXT morning at daybreak they got the rags on her and ghosted between the prison on the point and the broad steamship quay out into the Caribbean. The northeasterly trade made Martinique a long beat to windward. But you could count on a trade wind staying with you and there wasn't much gas in *Dawn's* tanks.

Dawn bored into it, sailing like a

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dream. Tremaine kept her going. Full and by, under jib, staysail, fore and main, the ship zizagged in long tacks across the blue and blazing sea. Even Joe, their black Virgin-Island foremasthand, had little to do in handling sail.

And then, perhaps because it was written, the northeast trade switched perversely to the southeast, and this when they were at the northern end of one of their long hitches on the starboard tack.

For a full day it blew like blazes, ripping a jib and driving them farther to northward with the aid of the tricky North Equatorial current, which seemed to have switched its course in order to take them out of theirs. But she behaved well and they lost only time—or so they thought then.

When the wind got back to the northeast and the sea smoothed out a bit they found themselves with an easy broad reach to Fort de France Bay.

"A damned lucky fellow to get her, this Johnny Axtell," Tremaine told his mate, holding her with a couple of light fingers on the wheel.

"You got to get him, first, sir," Mark pointed out, carefully sanding away at a spot on her rail where the wood under the varnish was white and weathered.

"That will be a mere detail," the owner assured him.

But later when Tremaine came up from below after listening to the one o'clock weather and news reports he wasn't so confident.

"You'd better throw a line over and try to get us some fish for supper," he said gloomily. "I've had a hint we ought to start saving what food we've got."

"More weather?" Mark asked, swiveling his eyes around a horizon beautiful with puffy trade clouds.

"No! I just caught a flash over the radio. Something like this: 'It is reported that John Axtell, of the wealthy Canadian mining family, is missing somewhere in the Caribbean. His seaplane is several hours overdue at Martinique.' "

Mark caught up the chart and then dropped it with a groan. "And us too far away from the islands to have a chance o' picking him up and selling him a nice reliable schooner!" he muttered.

"The first flash doesn't always tell the worst of it," Tremaine said grimly. "He may be more than overdue."

It wasn't two hours later that they sighted a boat flying a reversed French ensign.

It was a small motor-cruiser drifting helplessly in the trough. Time and time again she was rolled almost deck under by white-capped waves kicked up by the brisk northeaster. Her stern, when it lifted out of the sea, revealed neither propeller nor tail shaft.

The two men launching her dinghy had a lively time. But their skill got them clear of her. One man handled the oars. The other, who clutched a rolled chart, sat in the sternsheets.

THE dinghy bounced over the turquoise surface of the Caribbean at an urgent pace. The flailing oars sent a school of flying fish flitting uncertainly away ahead of the little boat.

Mark Paul, standing with thick legs outspread on the schooner *Dawn's* deck, nodded approvingly, almost benevolently, toward the two motorboat men.

"It ought to be worth a couple o' dollars to tow that disabled tin can to port, sir," he said to his skipper, in

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keen appraisal. "We're a good eighty miles to westward o' Guadeloupe Island, ain't we?"

He slapped his huge thigh as a sudden thought hit him. "Say, maybe we can stick 'em for salvage!" he cried. "There's no shippin' this far to eastward. We're their only hope!"

Young John Tremaine took a spoke on the wheel to keep the little ship lying to with mainsail ashake. "A man of your talent ought to be a shipchandler, Mark," he observed.

Mark Paul, who shared the seagoing broker's opinion of the gentry, grunted at the impact of the remark.

"Git forrard an' tie a stop 'round that jib," he said sourly to Joe, the black Virgin-Islander. "D'you want it to drop in the water?"

The dinghy drew closer.

"Don't look as if they'd left anybody on board the cruiser," Mark muttered to Tremaine. "Huh! A couple o' rough-lookin' mugs, too. Stand by to fend 'em off our paint, Joe."

The boat bounced alongside. The brown-eyed mulatto on the rowing thwart boated his oars smartly, jerked out his oarlock and stretched up a coffee-colored arm to the schooner's deck.

Suddenly John Tremaine stood up by the wheel. "Watch 'em, Mark," he warned softly. "Queer customers."

The white man in the sternsheets stood up. His cotton coat and trousers were fairly clean but his face did not inspire confidence. The right side from temple to neck, was a ruin—scarred cheek, eye gone from the socket, jaw lumpy and crooked. Whatever had hit him some time in the past had hit hard.

"Ask pairmission to come aboard, *m'sieur,*" he rumbled. He thrust his rolled chart over into the cockpit and pulled himself up onto the deck. He was hardly on his feet when the mulatto on the thwart went into action.

This man, while the schooner's company was watching his ill-looking companion, had quietly picked up something from the bottom of the boat. And now, with a lithe twist of his body and an upflung arm, he swung around toward Joe who was fending off the boat. The thing the mulatto gripped was a revolver. He jammed it against the Negro's head.

Before Joe could turn his eyes a bullet ripped through his brain. He slid over the side, hit the dinghy's gunwale and splashed into the sea.

The mulatto jerked his gun around toward big Mark in a sincere attempt at another murder. Only the thud of Joe's body on the side of the rocking boat prevented him from getting Mark with the next shot. The killer's catlike leap from the unstable thwart brought him aboard *Dawn* in a heap.

The white man with the crushed face had pulled a revolver from the waistband of his trousers. But, with all the will in the world for quick murder, he lacked the pantherish speed of his companion. Though staggered, Tremaine, spare and slimly muscled, was fast himself. Taking the only chance he had, he flung himself like a diver at the man, both hands clutching for the waist high revolver.

A SHOT roared into *Dawn's* deck as Tremaine's left hand closed on the revolver and knocked down the muzzle. The man stumbled back toward the stern under the impact of Tremaine's body against his legs. He did not fall. The revolver jerked this way and that in the swift duel of opposing muscles. The attacker's left fingers jabbed at Tremaine's head.

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Tremaine drove his free hand, knotted up in a stone-hard fist, into the man's stomach, well under the belt. It was a lashing, furious blow, with the shoulder following it through. The boarder doubled up in helpless torment. His fingers parted limply from the gun. Not too gently Tremaine wrenched the weapon away and slammed it against his skull. His writhings ceased.

Tremaine pivoted forward. Mark's swinging foot made contact with the mulatto's upturned face as the man, a-sprawl on the deck, snapped up his pistol for a third shot.

Mark had put his soul, as well as the beefy heft of thigh and leg into that kick. It caught the killer under the chin and lifted him well off the deck. When he landed his head, snapped back by the piston-like force of the kick, cracked against the rail. It sounded as if the tough wood had been hit by a hammer. The pantherish animation of the man went out of him like wind out of an eased sail. He became mere limp cloth.

Mark laid huge, solicitous hands on the foot that had delivered the kick. He emitted a roar of agony. That foot was shod only in a rope-soled espadrille and the mulatto's chin had been horribly hard. Whooping, Mark tried to walk toward his enemy, then hopped, instead. By that time a pitch of the schooner had sent the mulatto's gun clattering overboard.

John Tremaine, with eyes leaping forward and aft, was not amused. He held his captured revolver, a husky .38, with his finger on the trigger and his thin-beaked, lean face was grim. This schooner was his.

The dinghy was drifting slowly away astern. Joe's body, too big-boned for buoyancy, had sunk immediately.

"Tie up that coffee-colored lad, Mark," he commanded. "He's a bit too brisk on the uptake to suit me. Make a job of it."

"Will I, sir!" Mark rasped. "I'll throw a double reef in him he won't shake out in a hurry."

He looked astern. "Not a bad guy, Joe, when you needed beef. But you couldn't learn him the compass with an ax. Will you look at the hole that slug tore through her deck!"

It was Joe's epitaph. Mark did not elaborate it. Already his calloused fingers were digging at his big skull for enlightenment.

"What's this all about, sir?" he demanded, eying the unconscious white man. "An' where have I seen that caved-in conk an' busted deadlight before?"

"Search 'em," Tremaine commanded. He was quite as astounded as Mark, now that he had time to be. Piracy had been out a long time even in the Caribbean, he had thought. He continued to grip the pistol as he bent and unrolled the chart that the white man had brought aboard. It was 2318, The West India Islands, Haiti to Saint Lucia.

He frowned thoughtfully over a pencil-ruled course from Basse Terre, in the French island of Guadeloupe, to a tiny, utterly isolated coral rock far out in the Caribbean, Aves Island. The present position of the motor cruiser was on that line and about thirty miles from this uninhabited atoll of Aves.

"No other weapons an' no papers, sir, except an old newspaper clipping." Mark reported. "Damn little money—Martinique francs. D'you figure we've sort o' earned some indemnity?"

JOHN TREMAINE did not hear 'm. He was looking across the glinting blue water at the motor

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cruiser. Mark followed his eyes and gasped.

The motor cruiser was lifting her bow and sitting stern foremost into the sea. Her name *Marie*—Martinique, vanished as they read it. She was sinking fast.

"They could ha' plugged up the hole even if she did drop out her shaft," muttered Mark. He looked in perplexity at his commander.

Tremaine was thinking. "They probably cracked her shaft making knots—too many knots. The minute they got an answer from us they were ready to abandon her. It meant a triple murder to take us but they had to have a boat with motive power—to get to Aves Island. Extraordinary urgency, Mark. Hell-bent for Aves. Why?"

"A getaway," Mark suggested. "Anything in that radio news at noon about a crime or escape?"

Tremaine shook his head. "Mostly static and dull junk. No getaway news o' the islands or anything else but that flash about Axtell's plane. Let's see the newspaper clipping."

Tremaine unfolded it. "Well, I'll be—!" His jaw dropped.

"What is it?" Mark asked.

Tremaine did not reply, except for a muttered, "Axtell!"

The clipping was torn from a gaudy Sunday supplement. The sheet was largely taken up with photos and a cartoon of a carefree young man on a throne embowered in tropic foliage and surrounded by brown-tinted girls of opulent charm.

PLAYBOY PLAYS KING IN MARTINIQUE

the headline said and beneath was an account of the eccentricities of Johnny Axtell—son of the deceased Canadian copper king—who had built himself a winter palace in the beautiful French island of Martinique. Every autumn Johnny flew down in his private seaplane, piloted by his private pilot and attended by his personal valet, to reign over a huge estate.

His wife who traveled by Diesel yacht, reigned with him, which palpably cramped the feature-writer's style. But he made up for this regrettable note of domesticity by spinning out to a considerable length rumors that the playboy king yearly brought with him on his Caribbean flight huge sums in newly-mined Canadian gold to hide, like the pirates of old, in some secret place on his estate lest taxes or world communism rob him of his fortune. There were photographs of this Johnny Axtell, a weakly handsome young man, his vivid wife and his pilot, Red Vane, the trans-Atlantic flier.

All of it was news to both Tremaine and Mark, who stared over his shoulder. Axtell, it was stated, made talks in clubs and bars from Port of Spain, Trinidad, to the Florida keys. Tremaine most thoughtfully read every word of it and carefully refolded the clipping.

SOME extraordinary motive was back of the attack on the schooner. Nothing was too bizarre to be overlooked—not even the doings of Johnny Axtell.

"I don't believe much in coincidences," Tremaine said slowly. "It's queer this bird should have this clipping."

The white man with the crushed head and the new lump on his forehead took a hand in the game just then. His single eye was open, squinting against the blazing Caribbean sun.

"Wait, *m'sieur!*" he gasped in

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frothy, bubbling hate. "Coste—will fix—you!"

"Coste!" roared Mark, slapping his leg. "That's it! I saw this cracked egg here once in a Fort de France joint with Coste—smart French crook who was too hot for even Devil's Isle to hold."

"Wait!" growled their prisoner.

"Coste! There was plenty o' money an' blood in that motor-boat's cruise if Coste set her course," Mark asserted. "An' you notice—Coste ain't where there was apt to be trouble. He does his risky stuff at long range."

"At long range," Tremaine repeated.

"Not because he's any coward—but because he's smart," Mark declared.

"At long range," Tremaine said a third time. He examined intently the chart that they had captured. Suddenly he looked down at their angry white prisoner, over whom he was standing.

"Don't you know that not even Coste could get away with this—against a man like Axtell?" he said sharply.

"Axtell!" snarled the man scornfully. He spat to emphasize his disdain. "That *imbécile!* Coste weel—"

He stopped abruptly, conscious of the acutely interested faces of his captors. He dropped into a sullen silence out of which no question would move him.

"But he established a connection with Axtell," Tremaine said stubbornly. He lit his pipe. Again he studied the chart, with that line of course running to Aves Island, only thirty miles away.

"What did I tell you was old man Harrison's motto?" he asked Mark all of a sudden.

"Never let a customer get away," replied the mate promptly.

"Right!" said Tremaine. "Well, we'll combine that motto with one of my own: 'Never let anybody get away—with murder.'"

His face was not pleasant as he turned to the wheel, caught the schooner as she paid off and got her under way. With eyes on the compass he headed her due west—for Aves Island.

"Okay, sir," said Mark. "I got a little human curiosity myself."

He bent to inspect the damage done to the deck by the wild bullet.

Astern, the motor cruiser *Marie* of Martinique lifted her bow higher and higher. Then, as if she had suddenly made up her mind, she slid stern first down into the sea.

II

BLACK against the huge, sinking sun a small flat atoll lay on the surface of the sea. Mark, up on the foremast spreader, was conning the schooner over green water. In that part of the Caribbean the ocean bottom rose abruptly from a depth of more than a thousand fathoms to a few feet and *The West Indies Pilot* was none too reassuring as to the accuracy of the chart.

Three-quarters of a mile long, five hundred yards wide and eighteen feet high, peopled only by seabirds, said the *Pilot* of Aves islet.

The seas were piling up in foam and leaping in fury on the reef that lay like a rampart on the windward side of the little chunk of coral. As they passed well to southward Mark hailed Tremaine.

"There're a couple o' men on the island—an' a sort of shack. Can't spot anything that looks like a boat—" His eyes swiveled over the water to westward of the islands as his voice

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trailed off. Then, solemnly, he addressed the deck again:

"I see the tail of a seaplane, stickin' up straight in the sea."

"Where away?" demanded Tremaine. A seaplane!

"Broad on the starboard bow, sir. You ought to raise it on deck, sir. The birds are swirlin' 'round it. Nothin' but the tail shows. It's adrift an' sinkin', sir, goin' down fast."

Tremaine nodded. He could just make out the tail assembly—elevator and rudder—of this bit of aeromarine wreckage that the current was carrying to a berth in deep water.

"Keep your eye on the bottom, Mark!" he commanded, with a glance to northward. There, between *Dawn* and the island, an ugly coral head, just awash, was threshing the sea white.

With Joe down on the bottom many miles astern, Tremaine was single-handed on deck but he kept Mark aloft as the schooner went about. Handling the quarterstays himself, he worked her in, tack and tack among coral bastions visible only from the foremost spreader, to the westward side of the island.

There was some shelter there from the seas rolled up by the prevailing easterly trade wind and, so the *Pilot* averred, anchorage on a sand bottom in sixty feet with the middle of the islet bearing northeast.

Not until Mark's keen and seawise eyes had checked bottom depths ahead by the color of the water with the sun behind him did Tremaine start his motor and call him from aloft to take in sail. With the schooner's engine muttering at a little more than idling speed they took in jib, staysail, foresail and main. Then, under motor alone, *Dawn* crept closer to that rock-strewn beach

With his binoculars thumping his chest John Tremaine then climbed the foremast. He looked first into the sea, for the light was failing, and then toward the beach.

"See any customers?" Mark called.

There was a miserable-looking shack of white-bleached driftwood, a thing no longer than a toll shed, near the highest point of the island. Bunched in front of it, no fewer than five men stood watching the schooner. None waved a greeting.

One of them, leaning against the corner of the shack, had brilliant red hair. Another, a squat man of huge thickness of chest and stomach, had a pair of glasses leveled at the schooner. One of the other three was a Negro. That was all Tremaine could make out save that a myriad of seabirds resented their intrusion.

The door of the shack was closed.

"Five!" muttered Tremaine. He searched for some sign of a ship, but saw nothing except a rowboat drawn up on the beach. He leveled his binoculars at this. His lips tightened as he made out that on the stern was the name, *Marie*—Martinique.

From the wheel Mark hailed him. "Radio news about due, sir."

TREMAINE picked a spot off the beach where the light green of the water told of a sandy bottom. Then he climbed down to the deck. A minute later *Dawn's* anchor plunged into the sea.

"Let me know if the people ashore show signs of calling on us," Tremaine said and hurried below to the main cabin. He clicked on the schooner's battery receiving set. One paragraph in the brief news-broadcast set him to leaning toward the loudspeaker:

"Fears are felt this evening for the

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safety of John Axtell, the colorful so-called king of Martinique," the commentator said. "Axtell in his seaplane, piloted by the famous trans-Atlantic flyer, Red Vane, and accompanied by his valet, Smithson, passed Basse-Terre, island of Guadeloupe, at eight this morning, flying low over the sea.

"Twenty minutes later the plane, at an altitude of more than eight thousand feet, was sighted off the roadstead of Roseau, island of Dominica. Some observers say the motor was not firing smoothly. This was the last seen of the plane. Within fifty miles of its destination, Fort de France Bay, Martinique, plane and three passengers vanished completely. All day fishing craft have been fruitlessly searching the Caribbean between Dominica and Martinique. Not a trace of the plane has been discovered. It is rumored that the playboy had aboard his craft a substantial sum in gold. This, if true, should mean a rich reward to any lucky fisherman who finds Axtell's plane down with motor trouble."

Tremaine looked up. Mark, in the companionway, had been listening while his eyes watched the shore.

"What d'ye make o' that chatter?"

Tremaine nodded shoreward. "One of those fellows has brilliant red hair—like the famous Red Vane," he said. "And from the threat of that beauty we have penned up below, another of 'em may be Coste himself."

"Which adds up to what?"

"That we have a better idea of what happened to Johnny Axtell than most people," Tremaine said. "But we'll do more adding when we get more figures."

He went to the stateroom door, pulled the bolt that Mark had fitted on the outside an hour before, and looked in.

The eyes of the two prisoners sprawling on the floor glared at him. Their bonds were still tight. Mark had used numerous short lengths of line which do not stretch like a single long line.

"Here's a chance to get them figures," Mark called down to him as Tremaine came through the cabin. "The rowboat's pushing off from the beach—but the light's too bad to tell how many are in it."

Tremaine pulled his automatic, the only firearm aboard save for the captured .38, out of a drawer and ran up the companion ladder. "Put on your jacket—with that thug's revolver in the pocket," he said. "Don't start anything but don't be bashful—if they should board us."

"I'd feel better about bein' shot at if I knew why," Mark grumbled.

"I'm not so certain we're going to be shot at—this visit," Tremaine replied softly. "We're more of an unknown quantity to Coste, if he's really here, than he is to us. Watch the boat."

THROUGH the increasing duskiness the rowboat approached the *Dawn* without any attempt at silence or caution. Only two men were in it. At twenty feet the rower rested on his oars.

"On board the yacht!" the man in the sternsheets hailed. His big body loomed impressively in the semi-darkness. His weight aft lifted the nose of his craft.

"Hello the boat!" Tremaine responded.

"That's Coste—sure!" Mark murmured, staring hard. "Look at the bulk of him!"

"It is not my affair, *m'sieur*, but you are in a ver' dangerous anchorage."

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Coste called. His voice was deep and his words precisely uttered. "You would be far safer at sea."

"Thanks," Tremaine was casual. "I can't get through these coral heads now until daylight. We're staying tonight."

"I am here fishing—with friends," Coste said. "I expected my motor cruiser to return for me this afternoon with water and provisions. I am worried. You have not sighted her—the *Marie* of Martinique?"

He added without awaiting answer: "Or any wreckage of any description?"

"No *Marie* and no—"

Before Tremaine could finish, a sound came from within the hull of the schooner. Two loud knocks—a pause—another knock. It could only be one of the prisoners in the stateroom thumping against the side of the ship.

On Coste the effect of that sound was startling. He uttered an oath and leaned forward so swiftly that the dinghy lurched in the water.

"*Qu'est-ce que c'est que ca?* What's that?"

"One of my crew—working below," Tremaine replied promptly. To Mark he said under his breath: "Watch him!"

Again came that knocking. Two thuds—a pause—one thud. It seemed to mean much to Coste. He muttered an urgent command to his oarsman. With quick, powerful strokes the man sheered off. He rowed furiously away from the schooner. From Coste came not another word to them.

"That's one for Coste," Mark whispered. "That battered mug downstairs prob'ly served a term with him; jailbirds have signals o' their own. Coste knows how we gobbled up that guy."

"Quiet!" Tremaine breathed, listening intently. "The boat's stopped."

They cocked their ears. The rattle of oars could no longer be heard above the slow roar of the breakers. But a moment later they made out the oars again. The sound died away.

"Now what?" muttered Mark. "What's his game? Has he somehow grabbed Axtell to hold him for ransom?"

"I don't think it's ransom," Tremaine replied slowly. "That's a very complicated and dangerous stunt these days."

"I don't see what else it could be, sir," Mark said. "I'm bettin' that was King Johnny's plane we saw sinkin'."

Tremaine dropped the subject. "We'll have a bite to eat while we can," he said coolly. "Get the stove going; I'll take the deck."

Mark moved toward the companionway; then spoke uneasily. "By all accounts this long-distance crook Coste is plenty rough—but he's smarter'n he's rough. He'd never ha' gotten away with all he has, if he wasn't."

He went below. Tremaine tramped the deck. The weak spots in *Dawn's* defense were her quarters, where her sides were lowest, and the bow, where a convenient anchor-chain reached into the sea.

However, the night was not too black for a boat to be seen at twenty or thirty feet. And the five men on the island had only one small boat.

"One small boat!" Tremaine muttered.

PACING forward fifteen minutes later, he stopped abruptly. He had heard a splash nearby; he was certain of it. And the water here in the lee of island was quiet. He turned and ran silently aft.

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He had hardly gone ten feet when he made out in the gloom the head and shoulders of a swimmer submerging near the stern of the schooner. With another kick and splash the man vanished under the sea. Darkness would hide his retreat well.

Tremaine jumped to the motor controls in the cockpit. He stepped on the starter. The motor thundered into action. He put in the gears once; then stopped the motor.

Mark's big head was framed in the companionway. He came plunging up on deck. "What's up!" he cried.

"Clever fellow, Coste, as you said, and very quick-acting," Tremaine said slowly. "I'd say he has sent a swimmer in under our stern to wrap a wire around the propeller shaft. The wheel is fouled. He now wants to be sure not to lose our company during the night."

"Why, the dirty crook!" Mark blazed. No patient man, he could better withstand injury to himself than to this sweet little schooner. Frantically he jerked at the buckle of his belt. "I'll clear that shaft if I have to do it with my teeth!"

Tremaine's fingers, firm and commanding, fell on his shoulder. "Not now," he said softly. "That's what Coste expects we'll do. He wants to keep us busy on board. He'll have heard that motor running and he'll know we know."

Mark swung his fists in helpless exasperation. "I'll welcome him if he tries!" he snarled, peering into the dark water around them.

"We've been underestimating Coste." Tremaine's voice was cold but it shook slightly with suppressed wrath. "He changed his mind about not wanting us to stay the instant he heard his men signaling below. But—observe his foresight: He had the wire with him to keep us here in case we revealed that we had spotted that sinking seaplane."

"Let him try to take us!" Mark snarled.

"He will," Tremaine assured him. Quickly he began to strip off his own clothes. "And Coste won't put on such a half-baked show as his two men did this afternoon. We're in a jam, Mark. We can't sail out of here with no wheel, no wind, no light and plenty of coral waiting for us."

"What's the idea?" Mark stared at Tremaine as he wrapped his belt twice around his head, slipped his automatic in under it and cinched it up tightly.

"The best defense is always attack." Tremaine spoke grimly. "Perhaps Coste knows that, too. But anyhow, I'm going to try to put a couple of chunks of coral through the bottom of his rowboat before he can use it to board us."

"Aye, aye!" said Mark cheerfully and started to peel off his shirt. But Tremaine stopped him again.

"Your job's to guard the schooner, Mark," he said. "I want you to flash a light and make an occasional noise. Stop! What are you, a hero?" His voice crackled suddenly with authority as Mark persisted in shedding his shirt. "You have your orders!"

Mark knew that voice. With a heartfelt word he took a flashlight out of a deck locker and obediently turned its beam this way and that.

The light was swallowed up in the blackness, revealing only a circle of empty water.

Tremaine tested the security of the belt that was pressing his pistol uncomfortably against his cheek. Then he lowered himself over the side of the schooner.

"I'll give you a hail when I come

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back," he said softly. "Shoot at anything else."

"Good luck!" muttered Mark. "Don't kill any customers."

III

THE water was velvety soft and cool to John Tremaine's skin. His imagination conjured up sharks and barracuda. But his lips twisted—there were more dangerous animals ashore. He swam steadily with an underwater side-stroke that made not even a ripple on the water.

On the island he could see the shack outlined blackly by a flickering light. That must be Coste's cooking fire, now protected from possible rifle shots from the yacht by being placed behind the shed.

Tremaine approached the shore a hundred yards to the south of the shack. In the shallows he stopped to unlash his pistol. Gripping it tensely he studied the shadowed sand for possible movements.

Flat on his stomach he wormed his way up over the white coral sand. He stopped fifty feet above the tide; then turned sharp left. Parallel to the sea he slipped along, looking from the water's edge to the rising ground inshore. He could hear nothing but the boom of breakers on the reef and on the western shore of the little island.

He made perhaps seventy-five feet. Then, against the white flurry of the small waves on this leeward coast, he discerned a man's moving figure lower on the beach. This sentinel was looking toward *Dawn* and, from his attitude, keeping a good watch. Even more cautiously Tremaine crept on, past this man.

But, search as he would, he could see no sign of Coste's rowboat. He reached a spot on the line between the schooner and the shack. And still there was no sign of the boat! He wormed on. Some distance farther on he made out another sentinel on the beach. This man had stopped and was staring out at *Dawn* where the rays of Mark's flashlight were at that moment feebly illumining the schooner's cabin top.

Two men on watch—yet neither guarded the rowboat! Where was it?

Tremaine wriggled past the second man and then turned right. He crawled across the height of the island to the windward shore.

From here he could see the fire. As he slid toward it over exposed coral ledges and hollows of salt grass he spotted the missing boat. It had been carried up to the fire. Now it served as a seat for Coste himself. The man's broad bulk was unmistakable.

"He uses his head," Tremaine admitted uneasily. "He anticipated my move and spiked it."

At the opposite side of the fire on a chunk of coral sat the red-haired man. This, without a doubt, was Red Vane, Axtell's pilot. He did not seem to be a prisoner. He was drinking from a demijohn, while Coste, eating something in a bowl, watched him placidly.

There was a deliberation about Vane's movements when he lowered the jug that hinted of tipsiness. Tremaine studied him at length. A man of Vane's reputation for nerve was a factor that counted heavily for Coste.

A third man, a thin, narrow-headed fellow in a most incongruous-looking suit of formal cut and black cloth, was pacing nervously back and forth. Occasionally he took a bite at something in his hand but his appetite did not seem to be good. More often he stared intently to eastward.

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The nearest land was Guadeloupe, more than a hundred miles away. He could only be looking for a light—the motorboat. Coste did not look. Coste had guessed that the boat would not come.

"That lad must be Smithson, Axtell's valet, by the look of him," Tremaine decided. "And neither he nor Red Vane is a prisoner. They've been bought by Coste. The other two men, one Negro, one white, are the fellows on guard duty."

TREMAINE'S eyes focused on the shack. "Coste's game isn't just to rob the seaplane of that gold it's supposed to have been carrying," he reasoned. "If that had been it he would have had Vane land it nearer one of the islands and come alongside in his motorboat *Marie*. He probably would have murdered Axtell at once. No; there's more to it than that. A straight kidnaping—"

He shook his head. Once word reached the world that Axtell had been kidnaped not even Aves Island would escape search. Negotiations would be so dangerous as to be impossible. Besides that, the stage had been set, according to the radio news, to create the impression that Axtell's plane had crashed at sea, killing all aboard.

Tremaine's eyes remained upon the shack. "Since I can't get at the boat I must have a look in that hut," he decided.

He squirmed closer, taking advantage of what cover the hollows and ledges of this treeless, bushless islet gave him. And Coste continued calmly to eat while Vane drank and Smithson fidgeted.

Of a sudden Coste stood up. He wiped his mouth and moved to the corner of the shack. There he pulled a flashlight from his pocket and trained it on the leeward beach patrolled by his men. He pivoted slowly.

Tremaine caught the flash of the light as Coste turned it on and off. Two flashes—a pause—one flash. That same signal!

Within a few seconds the Negro guard arrived at a trot. The white sentinel followed him after a short interval. Coste took the Negro's revolver from him, broke it, removed the cartridges, examined it minutely and clicked the trigger experimentally. Then he replaced the bullets and returned it. With the same care he inspected the automatics of the white guard and of Smithson, Axtell's valet.

Red Vane, the aviator, sat still, demijohn on his knee, watching the cool, methodical inspection. He produced no weapon and Coste did not ask him for one. The ex-resident of Devil's Isle spoke earnestly to his men. His gesture seemed to Tremaine to be supplementing an outlined plan of attack on the schooner.

Of a sudden Coste waved his hand at the rowboat. At once Coste's two men gripped it on either side of the stern. Vane slowly put down the jug. The pilot and Smithson took the bow of the boat. The four men lifted it and carried it past the shack and down toward the shore opposite *Dawn's* anchorage. In spite of his potations Red Vane moved as steadily as the other three.

Coste, with a glance at the shack, followed behind the boat.

"An attack on the schooner—in force," Tremaine murmured.

Drops of sweat were forming on his forehead. He was up on his feet as the men began to disappear over the rise. He circled to get the shack between him and them. Then, running,

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with his pistol ready in case they returned, he approached the rickety little building, full in the blaze of the fire. Boxes, clothing and crude cooking utensils were scattered about the fire. In a box of food he found matches.

For an agonizing thirty seconds he waited to get Coste and his men a little farther from him. But he waited no longer than that. Every step they took away from him was a step nearer his schooner. He slipped around the side of the shack and to the front of the building. Only the night here protected him from being seen by his enemies.

Straining his eyes he made out in the darkness the vague, shadowy figures of the men carrying the rowboat down to the shore. He conquered an impulse to go rushing down at them with pistols roaring. Coste would like nothing better. He thrust the automatic between his teeth, where it would be handy. With quick fingers, he felt about on the face of the shack until he touched a hinge. Then he located a staple.

There was no lock. Only a stout peg thrust through the staple secured the door. He pulled it out, opened the door and slipped inside.

FIRELIGHT flickering through cracks in the sun-shrunken boards of the rear wall dimly illumined the shack and, almost at once, he saw a bundle over in one corner.

Dropping to his knee he touched the thing. It was a man—and warm to his fingers. Swiftly he lit a match.

The man was trussed up like a chicken for roasting. In addition his head was fastened rigidly against a piece of timber to keep his teeth from gnawing at the ropes that bound his hands and feet. Coste had done as good a job on his captive as had Mark on theirs.

The prisoner's eyes stared at the match. His face was weakly good-looking.

"Axtell?" whispered Tremaine. He dropped the match. "Axtell!"

"Yes! Yes!" croaked the man.

Tremaine's hands fell on the knots. "This isn't a rescue—but it's a chance to fight for your life," he muttered. "I've another man—and a boat. We've got to beat off Coste's gang before we can get away."

He frowned. He could feel the man quivering under his fingers.

"Only—two of you?" Axtell gasped. "How can you—fight five?"

Tremaine did not reply. A fine ally this was! His fingers continued their task but not with such fierce urgency. He stared down at the blurred face.

"I'll stay—here," Axtell said jerkily. "Count me out. Vane and Smithson kidnaped me for Coste. But Coste's not going to kill me. Coste said so—he swore it!"

He spoke with feverish urgency, as if trying to convince himself.

"What is Coste's game?" Tremaine snapped. "Quick, man!"

"He wanted to know where I had hidden my little nest-egg—about a hundred thousand—on my estate in Martinique."

Tremaine saw the light. No complications for Coste. A long-range crime—but simple—and a hundred thousand dollars!

"Well, I told him—I had to," Axtell said, shuddering. "But I'll be free soon. He'd sent his boat—the *Marie*—to Guadeloupe for news because I'd delayed my flight several days. But it's coming back here with water and—"

"Never mind that!"

"Coste is going in her himself to

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Martinique to find my treasure. I told him the truth. As soon as he has it I am to be released. Why should he kill me?"

"Why should he let you live?"

That voice, mocking, bitter, a voice from nowhere in the dark hut, sent Tremaine snatching at his pistol and leaping to his feet. He whirled to the door.

It was open. And there in the doorway, framed by winking stars and velvet sky, stood a man. Firelight flickering through the long cracks in the shack glinted back from the red hair of the intruder. It was Red Vane.

The man's arm moved and suddenly Tremaine with his leveled pistol stood facing the vivid white of Vane's flashlight.

"Drop the torch! Hands up!"

Tremaine's voice snapped with menace. His finger had taken up all slack on the stiff trigger of his automatic.

The flashlight winked out. But the man did not drop it or lift his hands. He remained motionless. Behind Tremaine, Axtell emitted a low moan of fear.

"THE gentleman from the yacht," Vane said in recognition. Then he addressed Axtell: "My revered employer, you are to be killed the moment Coste has a boat to take him away from here. He is sure you haven't the nerve to lie about your hiding place when you believe your life depends on telling the truth. Did you think you were immortal?"

Tremaine ignored Axtell's dribbling terror. "One more chance, Vane!" he said sternly to the aviator. "Put up your hands. Get in that corner!"

"Shoot!" said Red Vane in that cold and bitter voice of his. "D'you need a better target? Here it is!"

Deliberately he raised his flashlight and turned its brilliance on his own chest and face. The sharp rays threw strange shadows on his saturnine face.

Every tick of time was bringing four armed men closer to *Dawn* and her solitary defender. Yet Tremaine spared a moment to frown in quick thought at the pilot's harsh features.

"Go on!" Vane urged. He jerked a contemptuous hand at Axtell. "That bleating baby who bought me, body and soul, to fly his ship and wear a flunkey's livery is due to die. When I threw in with Coste and that rat Smithson I stipulated nothing but a little gentlemanly robbery—as a solace for an inferiority complex I got from working for such a pup. But Coste, I find, is—Coste. He'll clean things up—without a trace—in spite of promises. I'm finished—a double-crossing and double-crossed fool! My apologies, King Johnny Rabbit! Shoot, sailor!"

The seconds were flying, but Tremaine listened coolly to every bitter word. He studied the reckless, harried face of the pilot who had won the acclaim of the world by a dozen feats of undoubted courage. Tremaine knew the type; he knew the destructive power of self-scorn and reckless despair in a man of action adrift in a world where only money seemed to count.

"My guess is you are finished, pilot," he said brusquely. "You're not what I'd call a born crook but the fact that you couldn't stand taking orders from Axtell has made you one. You're about through—inside you!"

Tremaine waved a hand toward the beach. "If you want to go out right—I'm looking for a man to help me tackle those four, including the man that's making you a party to murder. How about it?"

With no hesitation John Tremaine

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turned his automatic and offered it, butt first to Red Vane. He was gambling high.

The pilot switched his flashlight on the weapon and then on the lean face of Tremaine. Abruptly, he snatched the gun.

"I'm with you—full throttle!" he said curtly. "Got another pistol?"

Sadly Tremaine shook his head. His eyes returned to the cowering form of Johnny Axtell. Suddenly he bent over Axtell, gripped him by the back of the neck and heaved him to his feet.

"I'm going to give you a chance to help save your life, whether you want it or not," he said. "Come on!"

"Coste — p-promised —" Axtell gasped. But Tremaine's hand across his mouth stopped him.

"Move!" he commanded. "Yell now and no one can save you. Give me a hand with him, Vane!"

THE pilot helped to propel Axtell out the door. Fleetingly Tremaine thought this was no way to treat a customer. But at any minute now he might not have a schooner to sell. Between them they guided Axtell silently down to the beach, bearing to the south of the course taken by the men with the boat.

The sands were deserted. The boat had already pushed off. Tremaine could not sight it out on the black water. It might be close to the schooner. He halted Axtell at the water's edge.

"You wanted to yell," he said savagely to the trembling playboy. "All right, yell now! Hail the schooner! Call for help! Go on!"

"But—"

"Yell!"

At a gesture from Tremaine Red Vane jabbed the automatic into Axtell's well-fatted ribs. His cry rose high over the rippling splash of the waves.

"Help!" he shrieked. "Help! Schooner ahoy! Help!"

Under cover of those poignant cries Tremaine spoke softly to Red Vane: "Coste won't attack my ship now, reckoning that this yelling will have both men in her up and on their toes. He'll postpone his attempt."

"And come shooting back to grab Axtell," Red Vane muttered. "And then—?"

"Coste won't want Axtell killed until he's sure of a get-away boat," Tremaine asserted. "You do what you can to protect Axtell with the gun if you can hide him from them. I've a job of my own."

"Right!" Vane's voice was grim yet eager.

With a sharp command Tremaine silenced Axtell. Once started, the man seemed set on shrieking unceasingly for help, although he knew no help could be had from the schooner.

IV

ON *DAWN*, Mark's flashlight was turning vigilantly. Tremaine raked the black sea with straining eyes. At last he made out a blur on the water. It was the boat and it was heading toward a point close to where they stood. Axtell saw it, too, and shrank back. But Tremaine gripped his arm.

"Don't run till they can see you!" he commanded. "Then head south and double back if you can—or take to the water. Vance will stand them off."

"They'll g-get me!" Axtell moaned. "Damn you, you should have left me in the shack!"

Tremaine did not answer. He touched Red Vane's shoulder in encouragement and farewell. Then, stooping, he waded out into the shal-

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low water. As soon as it was deep enough he submerged and swam fifty feet from shore. With eyes and nose about water he floated, watching the rowboat.

It passed close to him with two men flogging the sea with their oars.

"He's running along the beach!" a man in her cried. "I saw him!"

That would be Smithson. Then Coste spoke swiftly:

"You two will chase him. I want him alive! You, Miguel, down the beach . . ."

His low, urgent voice faded out of hearing as the boat shot past Tremaine.

At once Tremaine swam after it, keeping well under water. The bow grated on the sand and the men scrambled out. One darted down the beach; another ran toward the height of land commanding both sides of the narrow island.

But two men—and the squat bulk of one showed him to be Coste—remained on the beach close to the boat.

Tremaine cursed softly. Both those men had guns. He continued to swim until his foot kicked bottom. Then in water less than waist high he crept in closer, toward the stern of the boat.

The only thing in his favor was that the men had their eyes riveted on the southern end of the island.

Coste was talking to Smithson. Of a sudden he turned toward the shack and raised his voice in a shout:

"Vane! M'sieur Vane! Here—if you please! Come!"

His voice dropped to an undertone, cursing the pilot vehemently in French.

Tremaine slid in through the shallows.

Smithson, eager to please his formidable boss, took a few steps toward the hut. Coste's voice halted him.

Tremaine wormed in, flat on his chest in the shallows and laid a hand on the stern of the boat. But the bow was on the sand. It resisted his efforts to drag it clear. The two men were within thirty feet of him. He tried again.

Unexpectedly help came to him from the island. At the southern end a man shouted. Simultaneously a gun barked and a bigger gun roared back. Raggedly more shots crackled through the air.

Coste cursed again, taking a few steps up the beach. Tremaine got to his feet and heaved with all his might on the gunwale of the boat. The keel slid through the sand with a grating sound that set Tremaine's heart leaping in his chest.

But Coste, with hands cupped at his mouth, was roaring out an order—a command not to kill Axtell.

TREMAINE was up to his thighs pulling the boat seaward, stern first, when a shriek from Smithson betrayed him.

"The boat! Stop, you!"

Tremaine ran two more steps and gave the craft one final, mighty haul toward deeper water. Then he flung himself flat.

Lead screamed over him. He ducked under and took several strokes. Then, cautiously, he came to the top. Turning his head he made out the boat drifting toward him, but with dying momentum. He submerged again and with eyes open swam under water until he reached the stern.

Partly protected from the sight, and from the lead, of the men ashore he gripped the transom with one hand, kicking mightly, pulled the boat along. His ears warned him that somebody was splashing through the shallows be-

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hind him. The heavy boat shuddered under his hand as a bullet ploughed into it.

He gave it another shove, gulped air and flung himself under water. With luck the tide and night breeze would take it now. Ignoring the boat he swam downward and shoreward. His open eyes peered up through the blackness toward the surface. After a few strokes he stopped moving, conserving the air in his lungs, watching. His eardrums recorded the splashing of a swimmer.

A few seconds later a bulk darker than the sky showed almost above him.

Tremaine shot up with all the power of his arms and legs. He grabbed with his right hand for the throat of the swimming man and with his left thrust toward his belt. At the same time his head broke through the surface and he gasped in air. The air was sweet. If he could hold this armed man till the boat drifted out of sight—

His fingers gripped a leathery, muscled throat, thick and powerful. This was Coste, then! To throttle Coste was like squeezing the trunk of a tree.

Startled though he was by the attack from below, Coste reacted instantly. One of his hands darted down to his belt toward that gun that Tremaine had tried to find. Coste got it first. Tremaine felt himself hit in a dozen places. It was no illusion, that. Jagged bits of metal assailed his body. An instant passed before he realized that the gun, fired below the surface, had burst. The water had saved them from death by slowing up the flying fragments.

Tremaine gulped deeply again. He let go his grip on that huge iron-sinewed neck. It was invulnerable. He pulled himself bodily over Coste, forcing the squat man down into the sea. He fought now to keep Coste's head under while he still breathed. Every extra second meant much. This would be a finish fight; on that he was determined.

Coste kicked up at him. His squat, massive legs hit Tremaine's slim body with terrifice force. Not all Tremaine's wiry strength could withstand that attack. Coste battered him out of range of everything but those punishing legs. The man had the power of a gorilla in that ill-shaped body.

Beaten back, Tremaine swam seaward a few strokes and prepared again with all he had in him to stop Coste's attempt to catch the drifting boat. A few seconds passed without attack. Then his ears told him that Coste was churning his way back toward the island.

Tremaine looked around. The boat had drifted out of sight into the blackness. He waited until he was sure that Coste could not see him and then swam southward, parallel with the beach.

For the moment the schooner was safe. But on the island Red Vane and even Axtell were in graver danger. Coste, with his boat gone and his pistol useless, would be in no reasonable mood.

Once more Tremaine made a cautious landing on the beach. He listened intently and heard voices; then saw several figures outlined against the ridge of the island. He was moving toward them when he recoiled from something almost under his feet on the beach. He stopped. It was a man. But the man did not move. He approached warily but something in the position of the figure told him he need not fear.

The man was dead. He made sure of that. His searching hands and staring eyes told him in a swift inspection that this man was Coste's white follower. His pistol was gone. He was shot

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through the heart. Vane, then, in protecting Axtel's flight had exchanged shots with this man and got him. But where was Vane?

TREMAINE looked again toward the ridge of the island. The sky was lighter than the ground. He could see there were at least four, possibly five, men. And they were bunched in a sort of mass formation and heading at a slow pace toward the hut. Four or five men? Then Vane or Axtell—perhaps both—were with them. Of the enemy there remained only Coste, Smithson and the negro. But two of these were armed, at least. Who had gotten this dead man's gun? Vane—or Coste?

He crept nearer. Suddenly someone in the group flashed a torch. Tremaine dropped as its feeble beam swept in a circle. But he had a momentary glimpse of the group as the torch turned.

What he saw was Red Vane, supported between Smithson and the negro. Vane was wounded and a prisoner! Behind him walked Axtell, who was pleading with the unseen man who had used the torch. That would be Coste, then. Tremaine turned and stared toward the schooner. There was a pistol on that schooner—and there was also Mark, who would be no mean reinforcement. To swim out to get their help was the logical thing to do. It was also what Coste would expect him to do. He shook his head.

"That's no way to beat a man like Coste," he told himself.

Tremaine backed away, down to the edge of the water. Then, bending low, he ran along the shore. He kept on past the shack; then turned back and approached it, keeping the flimsy structure between him and the slow-moving group.

Three men with guns! A desperate stratagem occurred to him. Surprise was his only weapon; he must use it to the full. It was a double-edged weapon—but he must use it.

He crept to the dark front of the shack, opened the door and slipped inside. The cooking fire behind the place was burning lower now but it still threw red gleams of light through the wide cracks of the sun-shrunken planking. By aid of this illumination he found the piece of timber to which Axtel's head had been fastened. It might serve.

Holding it above his head he flattened himself out against the wall near the door.

It was a long time before he heard the shuffle of feet and click of coral pebbles that told him the party was coming close.

"Inside with you, M'sieur Axtell!" Coste's voice commanded. "Is it your Bible that says that the last state of that man shall be worst than the first?"

It was a threat.

"I assure you, m'sieur, that I did not escape voluntarily!" Axtell cried. "They made me—" His voice ceased.

"In with both of them!" Coste ordered.

The door was jerked open and Axtell, his twisted face grotesque in the red, flickering light, came staggering in under the momentum of a kick. He dropped to the floor.

Next moment Smithson and the negro, with Vane's arms round their shoulders, came edging in through the door.

By the merest chance Smithson saw Tremaine's club as he struck down with it. Crying out, Smithson jerked his head sideways to dodge the blow. The club thudded on his arm.

Vane saw, too, only a split second

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later. With a desperate effort the wounded pilot contracted his arms around the necks of his bearers, holding them in a yoke.

Tremaine's second blow cracked on Smithson's skull. Tremaine snatched at the pistol that Smithson had pulled out of his belt. He caught it from the valet's relaxing fingers.

The negro was ducking and writhing in the chancery of Vane's left arm. He broke away, whirled and darted toward the door. His flying body thudded into Coste's as the squat man came running in.

Quick to grasp what had happened and agile as a snake, Coste permitted the negro's blundering rush to carry him back into the open. Tremaine fired. But before he could aim a more careful second shot the door slammed in his face. Then lead bored through it, unpleasantly close to his ear. He answered; then, as he heard the scuff of retreating feet he saved his ammunition. He backed away from the door and looked around the hut.

VANE had fallen flat on his face. Smithson was down, too, and still out of it. Axtell was on his knees, head pivoting in dazed bewilderment.

Tremaine dropped down beside Vane, though his eyes were on the door. "Where did they get you, Red?"

Vane's voice was very faint: "In the stomach—in and out," he said. "Stand by your gun; you can't—do anything for me now."

Tremaine searched Smithson's limp body for cartridge clips. None. He walked quietly to the corner of the shack where he could peer through cracks that commanded the side the door was on—the southern side. The south was the darkest; therefore the most vulnerable.

Something hit the back of the shack with a thump. Tremaine whirled. Another missile clattered against the outside wall.

Tremaine's lips thinned as he saw what had happened. He jumped toward the back wall of the shack, the wall where the cracks were red. Coste and the negro had hurled brands from the fire against the sun-dried timber. It was beginning to crackle already. This was a house of tinder and there was no water.

"Quite a rapid thinker, Coste," said Vane weakly.

Tremaine thrust the muzzle of his automatic through a crevice. He fired at a shadow beyond the dying remnants of the cooking fire.

Somewhere in the darkness Coste laughed. "You will come out soon, yachtsman, and be shot," he called. "It is easier than roasting. *Vraiment, m'sieur!* Much easier!"

A sudden scuffling within the hut swung Tremaine's eyes around. Smithson! The man had been playing possum. Now he was on his feet and darting toward the door.

"Stop!" Tremaine roared. But he dared not waste another shot.

Smithson flung open the door. He ran out. Outside a gun crashed. Smithson, without a sound, plunged head first into the darkness. He hit the ground a couple of feet beyond the door and lay still. There was something grimly convincing about the way his body sprawled. He was dead.

The negro's voice lifted in a whoop of exultation. The night was too dark to let him see whom he had hit.

Creaking, the door slowly closed.

"Two left!" Tremaine said grimly.

Axtell gave vent to a low moan. "We're trapped!" Slowly he got to his feet. Red Vane did not move or speak.

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Tremaine looked around the hut. The fire was already licking through the cracks in the back wall. He walked over to the short, southern side of the shack and inspected as well as he could the driftwood planks and boards. Flimsy enough, certainly.

Tremaine picked up his timber club and with all his might hit the weakest-looking plank. His first blow knocked it loose from the wall of the shack. The next was tougher but he got it off. He worked unhindered by the men outside.

"They'll be able to shoot through there!" Axtell protested.

Tremaine looked at him. It was the first reasonable remark he had heard from the playboy.

"The more holes the better chance of somebody getting out," Tremaine said succinctly.

Axtell did not answer. But he began kicking at the other side wall. The smoke made them cough. From outside came not a sound.

Suddenly Vane spoke. "Sailor!" he said. "Sailor! Let that—little rabbit go. Hail Coste. Coste will let Axtell leave without shooting."

"It weakens our position," Tremaine said crisply, scowling at his customer. "And what good will it do Axtell—in the end?"

"I'd like to feel—I'd let him out of this fiery jam—to square things a bit," Red Vane said slowly. "I'm the man who got him into it."

Unexpectedly Axtell turned from the hole he was making. "Never mind," he said shakily. "I—I think you're right. There's no reason why Coste should let me live now."

IN TWO strides Tremaine was clutching Axtell's shaking shoulder. "Now you're talking!" he exclaimed. "Fighting's our one chance."

He knelt beside Red Vane. "D'you think you can walk, Red?" he asked.

"I know damn well I can't," the pilot murmured. His face was close to the dirt floor, where the air was cooler. "Make your play, sailor. If you get away with it come back for me."

"You know the answer, too," Tremaine admitted. He stood up and stared at the four walls. Besides the door there were now two other means of exit—the holes knocked in the opposite side walls. Three ways out.

Axtell was coughing hard and pawing at his smarting eyes.

"Look here," Tremaine told him. "They'll be watching both those new holes pretty sharply. Your best chance is through the door. Don't run out through the gap as you begin to open the door. Run when you open it widest—around toward the north. Head for the leeward beach. Can you swim to the schooner?"

"I can't swim at all," muttered Axtell. His teeth were chattering. "L-let's start—right now!"

"Get set—and good luck," Tremaine said curtly. "Your best hiding place is in the water up to your neck."

He caught at Axtell as the young man started at once toward the closed door. "Wait—till I'm parleying with Coste," he said. "That black is sure to be listening to us."

"Right!"

Tremaine moved toward the hole in the south wall. "I'll be back soon," he assured Vane and drew a breath of air.

"Coste!" he shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. His eyes studied the blazing back of the shack. The fire had almost eaten away the planks. "Coste!"

"Say what you would say!"

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Amidst the crackling of the mounting fire Coste's voice was hard to place.

"Coste—" Tremaine began. And at that moment his darting eyes saw Axtell rushing headlong at the door.

Instantly Tremaine got going. With head ducked between his shoulders and with gun hand and empty hand outstretched he shot across the hut toward what might be the fourth way out—the hole being eaten in the back wall by the fire.

Only flames might guard that side. Not even Coste could foresee everything.

He hit the remnants of the flimsy planking between uprights and he hit them hard. Flames flared and scorched him as he battered against the wall. Flying embers seared his bare back but only for an instant. Then he had burst through it and was stumbling almost into the glowing coals of the fire.

From the other side of the shack shots roared. He paid no heed. Axtell was on his own. Tremaine had a job to do.

He was ploughing to a stop, feet sliding in the sand and pebbles. He twisted himself around and dropped to his knees. His eyes darted from one end of the hut to the other as he jerked up his gun.

From the northern end the squat figure of Coste came racing suddenly into sight and into the blazing radiance of the flaming wall. Then some swift, instinctive intimation of danger slowed his rush almost as the firelight fell upon him.

TREMAINE was ready—ready and waiting. He was two shots ahead of Coste in opening up. He emptied his gun with furious trigger finger. All the lead he had he poured at Coste—three shots.

The chunky Frenchman wabbled curiously on his thick, widespread legs. He ceased firing, pistol still held high. And then, slowly, he backed up—eyes staring at Tremaine. He retreated step by slow step into the shadows beyond the north side of the shack.

Tremaine took a stride toward him and then turned an agonized glance toward the shack. The fire was raging high, now; his smash through the wall had increased the draft and doubled the power of the leaping flames. Red Vane was doomed to burn if he stayed within that place an instant longer. Only that was a certainty.

Tremaine shoved his empty pistol into his belt and dashed through the fire-edged aperture. He ran across the floor until he stumbled over Vane's legs; then bent and grabbed his arms and heaved him up onto his shoulder. Choking from an involuntary gulp of that strangling, smoke-filled air, he staggered toward the door, fell against it and struggled out onto the sand. No shots stopped him.

He labored on a hundred feet or so, with mind blurred to any need save that of getting Red Vane clear of the flames. Then, as his head cooled, he stopped and lowered the aviator to the ground. He tore away bits of smouldering cloth.

Then Coste came back into his mind.

He turned toward where he had last seen the man. He got up and moved that way, warily, as one must always move on this accursed islet. His aching eyes searched the unending night for enemies.

From somewhere behind him rose Axtell's voice, bleating frantically to the schooner for help. Even in that extremity Tremaine noted dully that there was no hint of wound or injury in that fearful shrilling tone. Axtell had

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gotten away. And reviving hope had made him a coward once more.

Tremaine's feet, dragging in spite of him, clicked two stones together. Something alive scurried off in the darkness ahead of him. Tremaine listened. A man—and running fast—but running away. Coste or the negro? He crept on, fingering his empty gun.

The roof of the shack sent up a sudden plume of flame. He saw Coste. The man was sitting down. His chunky trunk was bent forward and his forearms were crossed on his thick legs. He had his automatic in one hand and in the other was clutched a clip of cartridges. He did not move.

Desperately, with his own useless gun upraised, Tremaine charged him.

Coste did not turn.

Not until he was close did Tremaine see that through Coste's massive, invulnerable neck there was a bullet hole and in his bulging chest at least one more. He had used up the last moment of his life in trying to reload his gun.

Tremaine did that job for him. But he knew as he straightened up with a loaded automatic that the scurrying feet had been those of Coste's negro follower in full retreat. The man knew his master was dead.

Slowly Tremaine turned around and back-tracked to Red Vane. Beside the pilot Tremaine knelt and looked once more toward the schooner. All at once he heard the rattle of oars against rowlocks and realized that Mark, after this last burst of fire, had been unable to resist Axtell's cries.

Tremaine sat down on the sand to wait for him.

V

FOR the sixth time that afternoon, some thirty-six hours later, Johnny Axtell recounted with relish:

"And though Coste would have let me out of that blazing building scot-free, I said: 'No! I'll be damned if I'll quit! I'll scrap it out like a man and die like a man if I must!' That was what I said, Tremaine, wasn't it?"

Axtell still seemed genuinely doubtful about it.

"You said something like that and you stuck," Tremaine answered him with weary politeness and glanced under the main and foresail to see how the jib was drawing. Ahead of them, a rising mass on the eastern horizon, loomed mountainous Martinique and the kingdom of Johnny Axtell. Down below were four men—Red Vane in the cabin—and three prisoners in the stateroom.

"I think I'll let Red Vane go clear," Axtell went on virtuously, and also not for the first time. "Yes, I think so. He did what he could to make it up—and he may die anyhow. Remember, Tremaine, my story is that Smithson put a gun to my head as we were flying toward Martinique and forced me to command Red to fly to Aves. That's the story. You simply can't blacken any worse the name of a blackguard like Smithson was and it will let Vane out."

Since Tremaine had suggested that story he admitted that he saw it. "And Vane isn't going to die," he asserted emphatically. "It's a clean wound—no bullet in it—and it's staying clean."

"Huh!" muttered Johnny Axtell. He frowned reminiscently. "The things he said about me! Sometimes I think that it's my duty to have Red Vane punished a bit."

"Perhaps you're right, although he has been punished with lead and remorse," Tremaine replied coolly. "You're a brave man, Axtell."

"Uh—how—brave?" Axtell was startled.

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"To face the prospect of what Red Vane will do to you when he finishes his sentence—or escapes."

He made a horrible, throat-cutting gesture that set Mark to grinning for the first time in two days.

"Of course I wouldn't inform on him!" Axtell cried swiftly. "What d'you think I am?"

Tremaine didn't explain. "Better see if Red needs anything," he suggested.

"Sure!" Axtell hurried below.

Mark recovered from his grin. He was barely off the boil over his static part in the doings on Aves Island.

"Well," Mark said grouchily, "I may be the guy that missed the fight but I'm also the guy that done what we started out to do—sell Axtell this schooner."

"What?" Tremaine stared.

Mark nodded in gloomy triumph. "Sure. While you were corkin' off this morning," he said. "Axtell likes this boat. After that island—man, how he likes it!"

Tremaine was frowning.

"He wouldn't part with her for twice what I stuck him for, which was twenty-five thousand bucks," Mark pursued rather hastily. "We get it in gold—soon as we hit Fort de France bay, sir."

"You've got a whale of nerve to sell anything to a man who is under an obligation to us." Tremaine was hot about it.

"He wants it!" Mark was positive. "Besides, what was that one that fellow Harrison used to pull on you? 'Never let a customer get away,' wasn't it?"

Bullet-Proof Spectacles

PROGRESS in its inexorable march is being no little spurred on by one 32-year-old Peter Kock de Gooreynd. We have Mr. Gooreynd to bless for "Red Sails in the Sunset," "Isle of Capri" and "Serenade in the Night." He did not write these songs, but he published them. Next, with an abrupt volte face, Mr. Gooreynd designed and built airplane models which won something called the Wakefield International Cup. And now, with alarming versatility, de Gooreynd has concentrated his inventive talent on the human eye. "Watch me," says he, whipping out a neat case of lenses which look like glass but aren't. He drops one after another on the floor and they do not break. Next he picks up a mallet and whacks the lenses-which-look-like-glass-but-are-not. They shudder and flinch a bit, but they do not break.

The new flexible glass will be moulded to the individual eyeball and all the wearer will have to do is to slip it under his eyelid and go about his business with a glassy stare; he will never have to spend hours looking for his spectacles and finally find them on the end of his nose—with the compliments of Mr. Gooreynd, he will find them in his eyes. Any day now the versatile Belgian is going to publish a new unbreakable song entitled "Glass Gets In Your Eyes."

—*Peter Kelly*

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Stumbling Horses Make Gray Hair

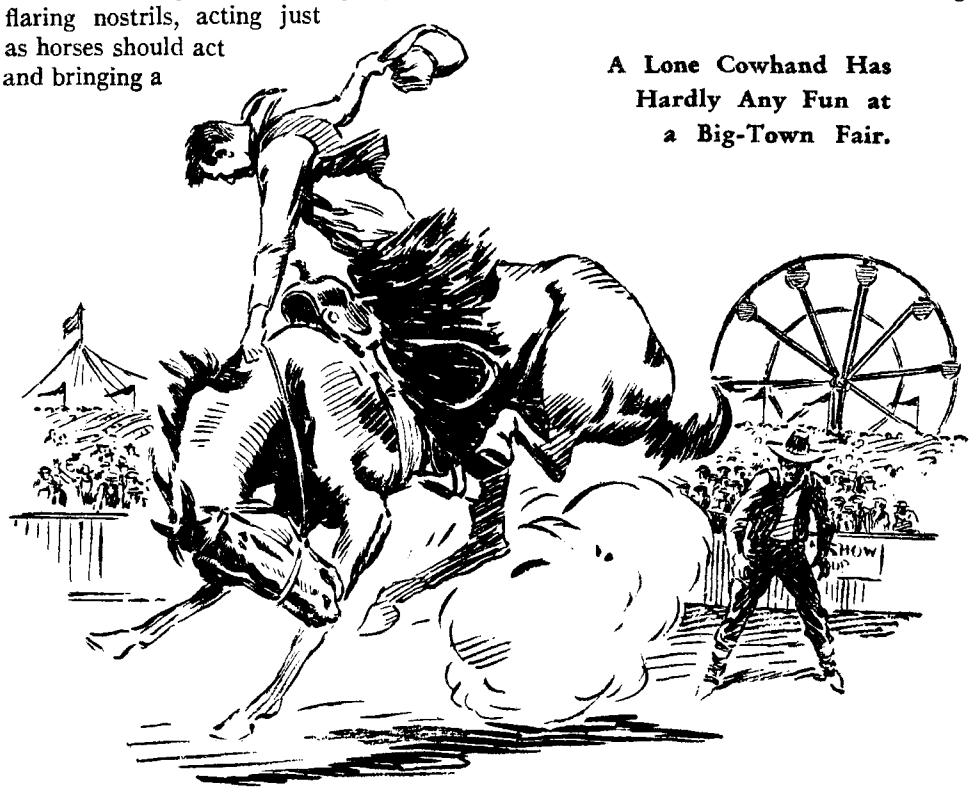
By BENNETT FOSTER

Author of "Riding Guns," "Trails West," etc.

THERE were three thousand people on the Iowa State Fair grounds that day and Bob Banner had never been so lonesome in his life. With his back against the pen that held thirty horses, young Mr. Banner considered the anomaly while a thin roll of brown paper and tobacco took shape between his fingers. Except for the horses, Bob was all alone.

The horses, of course, were a help and relief. Most of them were unbroken and when Bob Banner went into the pen, trailing his rope to snare one out for a buyer, they stampeded to the further side and stood trembling, with rolling eyes and flaring nostrils, acting just as horses should act and bringing a temporary breath of relief from the nostalgia that weighed on Bob's square shoulders. Rope in hand and with horses moving around the corral, a man could almost imagine that he was back at Bueyeros and that Pop Loftus was just outside the fence lining out the day's work to the hired hands. The cigarette fumed thin blue smoke between Bob's lips as he watched.

The sight of the multi-colored backs reassured Bob. They were there, the horses. The mares, Blaze, and the little dynamite-bucker, Sunday, and the big brown horse, Headlight. Headlight was one of the few broken horses in the bunch and Headlight



A Lone Cowhand Has Hardly Any Fun at a Big-Town Fair.

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was a stumbler. Headlight came from the OAT and was an old acquaintance. Pop Loftus always said that Headlight could fall for a mile before he fell clear down. Bob looked at Headlight and homesickness welled up in him. He hadn't *ever* been so lonesome, not even the time he broke his leg four miles out on the Queva Flats and had to crawl clear to the well; not even when he had held down the south line-camp for four weeks by himself. No sir! Never!

A man, a nineteen-year-old man, couldn't lean on the top bar of a pen and consider horses forever. A man couldn't let homesickness get him down. A man couldn't moon around over a bunch of horses and a recollection of yucca-dotted, hill-confined flats that were two thousand miles away. Bob Banner inhaled smoke from his cigarette and let it trail up in front of his nose. There were footsteps close by. A man couldn't let even Bones, the big swipe from Ackerman's stable, catch him with moisture in his eyes. The footsteps stopped and a voice beside Bob drawled.

"Good-lookin' bunch of horses, son." It wasn't Bones.

Bob turned around. A granger in a felt hat and a blue suit, was standing beside him, looking over the fence of the pen.

"Fair bunch," Bob allowed.

"For sale?"

"They're here to sell." Bob surveyed his questioner. He had thought "granger" on the first survey. Now, looking at the man's legs, that seemed oddly to wrinkle the blue trousers, and at a certain roll of the brim of the felt hat, Bob was not sure. "You interested in horses?"

"I buy and sell," said the stranger. "Name's Oliver. Who owns the horses?"

"Mr. Ackerman," answered Bob. "I'm workin' for him."

"Western horses," mused Oliver. "You bring 'em East?"

"Me an' Pop Loftus," Bob answered. He was by now used to the curiosity of these people. Men who had never been outside their township, men whose world was limited to an Iowa county, had questioned him, eyeing him as a South Sea Islander might look at an Eskimo. "We had five carloads. Sold some in Missouri and some through Iowa. This is the last of the bunch."

"I thought you said that Ackerman owned 'em." Oliver's bright eyes searched Bob's face.

"He does." Bob nodded. "Bought 'em from Pop. I stayed on to handle 'em, an' Pop went over into Illinois to visit some of his kin."

"Thats' the Ackerman that owns Rob Roy and that Grace C mare, ain't it?" Oliver had turned and was looking at the horses again.

"Same one," agreed Bob. "He's shippin' the trotters tomorrow."

Oliver said, "Hmmmmm," and was lost in consideration of the horses.

THE Sunday horse charged Headlight. There was a long-standing feud between Headlight and the Sunday horse and Sunday was wont to take advantage. Headlight rebuffed the charge with lashing heels, and Bob said, "Aw," disgustedly. Sunday went back to the other side of the pen.

"Likely-lookin' blaze-face horse," Oliver commented. "What's his price?"

"Fifty dollars." Bob answered.

Headlight, following Sunday, intent on retaliation, stumbled over some infinitesimal object in the pen and almost went down. Oliver grunted. "That's forty-five dollars too much," he said sharply. "He's a stumblin' horse."

Bob looked his surprise. He had met horsemen among these Iowa grangers, men who knew a trotting horse, who understood a pacer or a work-horse, but not men who knew saddle-stock. "Yes, sir," said Bob.

"Stumbling horses," Oliver announced succinctly, "make gray hair."

A girl came around the corner of the barn where Ackerman kept the trotters. Her hair was black as polished midnight and her eyes were so dark a blue as to be almost black. There was a dusky rose on either cheek and her lips were bright as Indian paint-brush in the spring.

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"Dad!" the girl exclaimed, "I've looked all over."

"I've been right here, Bessy," said Oliver. "I've been lookin' at some horses."

The girl surveyed Bob Banner with her dark eyes. There was no curiosity in the eyes and no surprise. "I knew I'd find you where the horses were," Bessy Oliver said, calmly, turning to her father. "Uncle John is waiting."

Oliver nodded. "I'm comin'," he said. He took a final look at the horses, nodded to Bob, and followed the girl. Bob dropped his cigarette in the dirt, twisted his boot on it and squatted beside the pen-fence again. Oliver and the girl were gone, rounding the corner of a building. There was the clang of a hammer on iron where some smith fashioned a thin racing-plate for a trotting horse. Across the way, over by the Lloyd barn, two race-drivers appeared, stopped and began an argument. Their words drifted across.

"She did it in two-four."

"I tell you it was two three-and-a-quarter."

Bob sighed. It sure was lonesome.

Bones, big and tall and lanky, enormous black hands dangling almost beside the knees of his tattered bib overalls, came along the pen-fence and stopped. Bones was six feet and four inches of man. His hands were so big that when he eared down a horse for Bob to saddle, they seemed to cover half the horse's head. His face was a small black blob on top of a thin neck, and his voice was a reedy treble.

"Lend me fo' bits, Mista' Bob?"

Bob Banner's hand stole toward the pocket of his California pants. "What do you want half a dollar for?" he demanded, knowing that he would lend the coin, no matter what the reason. Bones was the only human of the lot, now that Pop Loftus was gone. Bones was. . .

"I bet that Scrappy nigger over to Lloyd's that you'd ride Sunday this aft'noon, Mist' Bob," Bones answered. "Scrappy allows that you'll get th'owed. I bet him fo' bits. Ain't no hawse goin' to th'ow you, is they?"

Bob Banner grunted and brought out the half dollar. "Go make your bet," he ordered, holding out the coin. "And you be on hand to help me saddle this evenin'."

"Yes, suh!" Bone's hand engulfed the half dollar. His long legs shambled away. The drivers had gone from in front of Lloyd's stable. Bob got up. Headlight stood on three legs inside the pen. Sunday was eating hay from the rack. Down at the grandstand a balloon was going up, mounting slowly in the air, a man in white tights sitting on the cross bar below the wrinkling bag, and three thousand people watching him, shouting encouragement. Lord, but it was lonesome!

The balloon hung in the air, the little white figure below it doing foolish things on the trapeze bar. The watching crowd gasped, all together, when the acrobat dropped and swung by his heels. Then the dirty wisp of white that was the parachute detached itself from the bulk of the balloon and floated earthward like a cottonwood seed in the wind. People began to pass Bob Banner, talking, telling how they had felt and what they had seen, the honest twang of their voices a foreign accent to Bob's ears.

BOB was watching the horses again when Ackerman came up. Ackerman's shirt stuck to his shoulders and there were damp areas of cotton under his arms. There was a small man, dark-faced and thin, with Ackerman. The dark man looked at Bob, saw him, and then did not see him although he continued to look.

"Where's Pritch?" Ackerman asked.

"In the barn," Bob answered.

Pritch was Ackerman's driver. On the first day of the fair Pritch had driven Rob Roy and won two heats and a race. Pritch had been a hero that day but had refused to share his glory in friendliness. Bob did not like Pritch. For a horseman Pritch was too proud.

"Come on, Tolly," Ackerman ordered. He waddled to the barn, his stomach pendulous over his belt like the belly of a cow that has been on *vega* hay all winter.

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Dark-haired Tolly went with Ackerman. Tolly wore tan shoes, their toes high and curved and brightly polished, and with pearl buttons winking on their tops. The heels of the tan shoes were shabby.

The two were in the barn for some time. When they emerged, Pritch was with him. Pritch chewed a straw and his cap was pulled down over his eyes. At the pen-fence the three stopped and eyed the horses in the enclosure. After a time Pritch spoke.

"That bay mare and the big brown," he said, pronouncing judgment.

"The brown horse any good?" Ackerman turned to Bob.

"He's a stumblin' horse," answered Bob. Oddly the words of the man Oliver repeated themselves in his mind. "Stumblin' horses make gray hair."

"Huh," Ackerman grunted. "All right, Tolly."

"Well," Tolly said, slowly. He was looking at Bob, seeing him again.

"We'll take care of that," said Pritch shortly. "It's noon."

"Dinner time." Ackerman's voice was heavy but there seemed to be a sort of relief in it. Bob climbed the pen-fence. He must fill the watering trough and pull the hay down in the rack before he went to dinner. Ackerman and his companions were walking away from the pen when Bob went to the trough.

Dinner was a hamburger sandwich and a cup of coffee at a stand in the midway. People elbowed, talked, sweated, and jammed around him. His Stetson and his California suit and his boots were curiosities to be explained to questioning youngsters.

"Yes, that's a cowboy. That's a cowboy, Willy."

Bob was glad to get back to the pen. At least the horses were in the pen and the horses were a sort of cure for loneliness.

At two o'clock Bob brought his saddle from the barn, took his rope into the corral and snared Blaze. Saddling the little bay-mare he tied her to the fence and went back for Sunday. While he was catching Sunday, Bones shambled up beside the pen and stopped. Bob dropped his rope on Sunday's neck and the Bucker stood still, trembling. This was getting to be an old story both to Sunday and Bob. The first day of his arrival at the fairgrounds an official had seen Bob ride the little horse. Bucking horses and bronc-riders were a novelty. For ten dollars a ride Bob entertained the crowd in the grandstand at the track. He rode Sunday between heats of the trotting races, letting the little horse buck his wicked soul out for the amusement of the people in the stands. Bob and Sunday were an attraction, just like the balloon ascension and the ferris wheel and the merry-go-round.

SUNDAY, with Bob's rope making a hackamore on his nose and snubbed short to the saddle horn, walked beside Blaze as Bob rode to the track. Bones, still trying to tell Bob about the bet he had made, his long legs taking one step to Sunday's two, kept up with them. Outside the gate to the track they stopped, waiting for the first heat to be trotted. The horses, pulling the little bikes, the drivers sitting almost on their animal's tails, scored twice and then were away, the bell sounding to signal a fair start. Bob lounged in his saddle. Trotting races disgusted him. He could understand a bunch of men meeting outside town on a Sunday morning, each intent to see if his horse were the best quarter-horse; but this business of a horse trotting, swinging legs in rhythm, head outstretched, with the little bike whirling along behind, while interesting enough the first few times, had no real meat in it. Bob let his eyes wander from the track.

A hundred feet away, the man that Ackerman had addressed as Tolly, stood with a girl in a rose-colored dress and a big picture-hat. Tolly looked quickly away but the girl stared at Bob, a slow, bold look that somehow was speculative. Bob caught the expression in her eyes and turned his head. The trotters were ending the heat, moist dirt from the sprinkled sur-

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face of the track flying up from their hoofs and bombarding their drivers. It was time to go.

Bones opened the track gate and Bob led Sunday across the dirt, through an opened second gate and into the grassy oval of the track's center. In front of the grandstand a man was bellowing an announcement. Bob paid no attention to the announcer. This was business, ten dollars' worth of business. Bones shambled up, possessed himself of the lead rope, and Bob dismounted. Deft movements placed a hackamore on Sunday's head and avoided snapping teeth. Bones came up the rope, got Sunday's ears in his big hands, spread his legs and held on. Bob put his saddle on the buckskin's back, cinched it, circled with Bones and the horse, caught the flank cinch and pulled it tight. Pulling up his trousers he advanced on his horse, caught a stirrup, twisted it out and mounted.

"Turn him loose," he ordered Bones.

Bones' big hands let go their hold and Bones jumped back. Sunday's head went down and his back went into a sharp arc. Sunday's feet smote grass and dirt. Bob, guessing with the horse as to the direction of the next jump, scratched with his spurs and rode pretty.

Sunday bucked to the fence, hung his head over, bucked again, whirled, crushed Bob's boot against the top paling and went along the white-painted posts and boards. The grandstand roared. High above the roar came a voice flinging out a cry to the rider in the oval. Surprise penetrated Bob Banner's detachment. The voice, high and feminine, was calling: "Stay a long time, cowboy! Stay a long time!"

For an instant, caught by surprise and off balance, Bob poised on Sunday. A stirrup flapped free, lost from a booted foot. Mastering equilibrium, Bob found the saddle again. Still the stirrup banged flank and leg and shoulder.

Two minutes more. The ride was finished. Bob kicked his other foot free, jumped, and recovering, swept off his hat and bowed to the stands. The stands continued to roar. Sunday bucked on down the fence, Bones following at a shambling run. The show was over for the day.

BACK in the pen Sunday communicated his residue of excitement to the other horses and they huddled against the further wall and milled when Bob went in to turn the water on in the trough. The echo of that long-drawn yell from the grandstand lingered with Bob. That call: "Stay a long time, Cowboy!" had been like a breath of New Mexico wind carrying sage and the smell of mesquite and the clean, faint aroma of the flats. Who had called? Bob wondered.

The trough was filled and he turned off the water and went out of the pen, closing the gate behind him. At the corner of the pen were Tolly and the girl in the rose colored dress. Bob walked toward them.

Tolly was ill at ease. He talked from the corner of his thin mouth as he made introductions. "Want you to meet Lola Montgomery, Mr. Banner. She seen you ride an' nothin' would do but meet you."

Bob Banner was embarrassed. He mumbled a, "Please to meetcha," and ducked his head awkwardly.

The girl said: "You're some rider, cowboy," and her eyes estimated Bob. Brazen, blue eyes they were.

Lola took the conversation in hand. She knew cowboys, or so she said. She had met the fraternity in Kansas City and at Omaha. A traveled woman, Lola. Tolly helped cover Bob's embarrassment by suggesting that they get a glass of beer together. The weather, Tolly commented, was hot, and the beer would go good. The three strolled toward the midway.

In the back room of a saloon opposite the entrance to the fair ground, they drank their beer. The room had been gained through a door marked *Ladies' Entrance,* and there was sawdust on the floor. The room was cool and filled with the sharp aroma of stale beer and other drinks.

Lola salted her beer and drank from the foam-covered top, the little finger of her right hand ostentatiously extended. Tolly seemed amused with some secret, inner

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amusement. He swallowed his beer and, rising, announced that he had to see a man and that he would leave them. Bob Banner started up but the girl stopped him. She was, she said, in no hurry. Bob sat down again and the white-aproned bartender brought another round of beer.

With Tolly and the bartender both gone Bob turned his glass, making wet circles on the bare wooden top of the table. Lola talked. She liked cowboys, Lola did. They were lively and good spenders. Did Mr. Banner know a cowboy named Red McCormick? He did not? That was too bad. Red was certainly a spender. Lola's glass was empty and the bartender reappeared, disappeared and came back again with another full glass. Had Mr. Banner ever been to Wyoming? No? Red McCormick came from Wyoming, but Lola guessed that it didn't make any difference where a cowboy came from. They were all alike, good spenders and good fellows. Bob found himself more at ease. Homesickness and loneliness were almost banished, lingering only as a background. Lola's eyes were bright and Lola's hand was soft when she placed it over Bob's hard calloused one.

Time wore on, unnoticed. Lola drank beer. Beer, she thought, was a good drink for a lady. There were some ladies that would take stronger drinks but Lola was not one of them. Bob kept his third glass before him and listened. He didn't want any more. He wondered, sitting there, why he had not ventured from the fair grounds before. He remembered tales that had been brought back to the OAT from Kansas City. . . .

Deftly Lola turned the talk to food. Bob looked at his watch. With a start he realized that it was six o'clock and that he had been gone from the horses for two hours. Lola was getting up from her chair. The bartender appeared and accepted a dollar. Bob Banner escorted Lola through the Ladies' Entrance, her hand resting on his arm. The street was darkening and at the entrance of the fair grounds lights showed.

THERE was a restaurant further down the street. It seemed to Bob that he made for the restaurant of his own volition. He was unconscious of the gentle pressure on his arm. A waiter seated them in a booth and brought menus, hovering close until they had ordered. Lola did not talk as she ate, but her eyes, now and again, lifted from her plate and caught Bob Banner's. There was something in those eyes, a promise that softened them and belied the harsh wrinkles at their corners, and the thin lines that came down beside her nose and pinched the corners of her mouth. Bob Banner squared his shoulders and held his knife and fork with a strong grip. Under his chair his boots were firm on the floor and there was an eager restlessness in his body.

When the meal was finished and the check paid they left the restaurant. The street was dark now, illuminated by lights that shone through windows and decorated the entrance to the fair grounds like red and green and blue jewels. Lola's hand was on Bob's arm once more and she was looking up at him.

"Cowboy," Lola said softly.

"I've got to look at the horses," Bob Banner announced. "Once I tend to that—"

"Horses . . ." Lola pouted prettily. "You think more of your old horses than you do of me."

It was not that, Bob assured her, but the horses were his job. He had to look after them. He must go. . . .

While they argued people brushed past them. The two were attracting attention. Bob's broad-brimmed Stetson and California suit added to the attraction. Lola was petulant. If Bob thought more of his horses than he did of her . . .

From Bob's right a laugh sounded, a silvery, crystal laugh, a laugh like the chuckle of a trout stream that has found a pool and tumbles into it. Bob looked up swiftly at that sound. Oliver was standing on the edge of the sidewalk looking at Bob with sardonic, knowing eyes, and beside Oliver was the girl with the midnight

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hair and the roses on her cheeks and the mouth bright as Indian paint-brush in the spring. It was the girl who had laughed. Her blue-black eyes caught and held Bob's and she spoke.

"You made a good ride, cowboy. Don't get thrown now."

Oliver took the girl's arm and they stepped from the curbing into the street. Lola tugged at Bob. When he looked at her she was frowning, the wrinkles at her eyes deep and the lines beside her nose become deep creases.

"You—" Lola began.

"Go on," ordered Bob Banner. "Get out you—you—"

Lola struck at him. Her hand spatted sharply against his cheek and her voice was shrill. "Ditch me, would you, you—"

People stopped to see the excitement. A blue-clothed man with a gray helmet that bore a shield, pushed through the crowd. His eyes were as knowing as Oliver's had been, but more tolerant.

"G'wan," commanded the policeman. "You know the rules, sister. No pick-ups on the fairground."

Bob shoved Lola away. He stumbled as his boots struck the curb. A wagon-driver pulled in his team sharply and swore as Bob swerved before him. Back on the sidewalk people moved again and a woman's voice, Lola's voice, high and thin, shrilled objurgation. Bob went through the fairground entrance and swiftly, seeking to hide from himself more than to hide from others, made his way out of the lights and into the blackness. Fool! Fool!

"You made a good ride. Don't be thrown now."

"Stay a long time, Cowboy! Stay a long time!"

Oliver's daughter, Bessy! It had been her voice from the stands. It had been her calm dark eyes this evening, over there across the street. And she had seen him, Bob Banner, like that. . . .

BOB'S stumbling feet carried him to the familiar side of the pen. In the pen horses moved swiftly, disturbed by this apparition that came from the night. Bob Banner sat on the ground beside the pen and pulled off his hat. The wind was cool enough but somehow it did not cool his forehead. Fool! Fool!

Squatting there in the corral with the familiar smell of the horses closing around him, with the presence of the horses pressing against his back like a steady, friendly hand, Bob Banner thought it out. He thought of Pop Loftus, dependable and gray-haired and kind, and of the stake that Pop had given him in this venture with horseflesh. When Bob Banner returned to the OAT he would not be a thirty-dollar-a-month cowpuncher but a young man with a bank account and a future as a cattleman before him. He thought of Ackerman, fat and sweaty and shifty-eyed, and of Ackerman's mean little tricks in trading horses. Of how Ackerman, the day before, had brought a green, newly married youngster, an Iowa farm boy, to the corral and there sold him a team of unbroken horses, smoothly applying pressure until the kid bought because he was too proud to do the thing that reason dictated—turn and walk away.

From Ackerman, Bob Banner's thoughts flashed to Pritch, lean and waspish and narrow-eyed. Pritch, so rumor went, could not drive for any owner but Ackerman, and the track stewards watched him closely. And then there was honest, gangling, lazy, Bones. Bones who had borrowed fifty cents today and would borrow again tomorrow and again the next day, spending more time thinking up a pretext for borrowing than he would have spent earning the money. Poor Bones.

And then there was Oliver, the man that Bob had labeled "Granger." Granger! Bob could almost laugh. Those wrinkles in Oliver's blue serge trousers came from boots, high-heeled, narrow-necked boots, and the roll in the brim of his hat was caused by the grip of a hand applied many a time and from the sweep of winds across the expanse of range land. The crow's-feet at the corners of Oliver's blue eyes did not come from the glaring sun across Iowa

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corn-land but from years of squinting at a brighter, bigger sun that beat fiercely down on grama grass and yucca and the baked washes of arroyos. Granger!

Bob thought of these men and of the things about him, but more than this he thought of the two girls, of Lola, brazen and bright and tempting.

But Lola could not hold his thoughts. There was the other girl, Oliver's daughter Bessy. Bessy Oliver . . . Bessy . . .

A call, faint, muffled, and yet distinct, pierced through the haze of thought. "Mist' Bob. Mist' Bob! Trouble in that voice. Anguish and peril in the tones. Bones was calling him, Bones who slept in the loft of the barn where Ackerman kept the trotters. Bob Banner came to his feet. There was a scent in the air, a warning, threatening odor. As he looked toward the barn, poising on his toes, ready, Banner caught sight of a glow, a faint light, and then at a corner of the barn loft a little tongue of fire licked out, disappeared, and then licked out again!

RUNNING toward the barn Bob careened against a man who tried to stop him. Bob sent that man reeling. The barn door was alight with flames and burning hay dripped from the loft, trickling, it seemed, like fluid fire. Bob went through the burning screen, his face shielded by his arms. Beyond the hay the stable was not yet afire. The floor was smooth and slippery with years of use. In the stalls two horses screamed their fright, their voices almost human.

Bob yelled, "Bones!" and from beyond the stalls Bones answered him.

Bones was a pitiful thing. He crouched there, close by the stall that housed Rob Roy, his big, gaunt hands locked over his head. When Bob tore the hands away he could see a darker stain against Bones' ashy skin. Bob reached down and pulled Bones to his feet. Bones stood there, reeling.

"My haid!" Bones wailed. "My haid!"

There was steel in Bob Banner's voice. "Never mind your head! The horses!"

Some of that steel entered into Bones. He stopped his reeling and his voice was steady. "Yes suh, Mist' Bob."

Snatching a halter from a nail Bob went into the nearest stall. The horse fought him but the headstall went on. Bob's hands were sure and his voice was steady and unafraid as he talked to the horse.

"Easy . . . Easy! Whoa, you fool! I ain't goin' to hurt you!"

A cooling-blanket, thrown across the wall of the box stall followed the headstall of the bridle. Bob wrapped the blanket around the bay head, around the rolling eyes and the flaring, frightened nostrils.

"Take her out!" Bob commanded Bones, tendering the halter rope. "Take her out, Bones."

Bones' big hands engulfed the lead-rope. Bones rocked as he walked; but he walked, and the mare, her head blanket-wrapped, followed him.

Bob Banner went into the next stall. The horse in the stall was big and brown with a white muzzle and rolling, glassy, terrorized eyes. Rob Roy, the two-ten trotter should have been in that stall but this horse was no more Rob Roy than the mare had been Grace C. No more Rob Roy—Why, the mare had been little Blaze, and this big, brown horse, this horse that fought away from the halter, was Headlight—honest, stumbling Headlight! What was Headlight doing in Rob Roy's stall?

The halter went on. Bob pulled the California coat from his shoulders. No time to search for a blanket. The fire was close, very close and very hot. Burning hay dripped on Bob Banner's shoulder as he forced the coat around Headlight's eyes and tied it there, using the coat arms to lash it securely. Headlight. Headlight, the stumbler. Stumbling horses make gray hair. Come on, Headlight. Don't hang back like that. Lead, you stubborn mule. Lead, you fool! Come on, Headlight!

The screen of burning hay dripped faster. It burned on Bob's shoulders. Burned on his arms, his face. Headlight fought back against the rope. The smoke was thick, thick and choking.

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The screen of burning hay was past and before Bob was the smoke-clouded entrance to the barn. Ten feet to the barn door. Ten feet of smooth, unburned floor and of fighting against a horse that fought the rope. Headlight forged suddenly ahead, stung by the fire behind him. Through the smoke Bob Banner caught sight of a twisted, distorted face. A face that was familiar. Tolly! Tolly's mouth was open but his cursing was lost in the crackle of the burning hay and the snap of the flaming timbers. Tolly's hand came up and flame glinted from the bright thing he held. A gun—it was a gun that Tolly held. He was pointing it at Bob Banner.

ON the smooth barn floor, on that floor over which a thousand horses had passed without a fault, Headlight stumbled. "Fall for a mile," Pop Loftus had said. Headlight fell a long time. He fell against Bob Banner, knocking him flat. He kept on falling, all the time trying to get his feet under him again as has been the custom of a stumbling horse since time immemorial. He fell against the crazed man in the doorway—the man who pulled impotently on the trigger of an empty pistol. He fell clear on out of the barn and then Headlight fell down.

In the barn Bob Banner crawled to his feet aided by the same post against which he had struck his head in falling. His head was ringing, filled with a light that did not come from the fire, and with a litter of words and ideas. Ideas about stumbling horses and about a man who stood in the door of a burning barn and held a gun in his hand. Bob lurched forward. His groping left hand found a cloth-covered shoulder and his lashing right hand found a man's face, found it again and again and again. And then Bob Banner came out of the barn. Came out into the light of the flames. Came out to where a crowd was forming and firemen were running, hauling a horse and carrying axes. Came out to where Bones was catching the lead rope of a big brown horse that was scrambling to his feet. Bob Banner dragged a small limp man . . .

At the edge of the crowd was Oliver in his wrinkled blue suit and rolled-brimmed, high-crowned hat; and beside Oliver was Bessy with her hair like polished midnight. On Oliver's other side was a man, Oliver's counterpart except for clothing.

Bob Banner released his hold on Tolly's shoulder and walked toward Oliver and Oliver's daughter and the man who so closely resembled Oliver. There was something that he wanted to explain, some word that he must give Oliver. Before he reached them he heard a bell clanging brassily in the midway. The bell came nearer and nearer, splitting its brass throat.

Bob Banner reached Oliver. "The horses —" he said.

Oliver tried to catch him for, like Headlight, Bob Banner fell heavily. The bell beat at Bob and then stopped and the girl with the black hair was kneeling beside him, her hands soft and soothing. An ambulance, its horses sweating, parted the crowd, and a policeman, gray helmet on the back of his head, was bending over Tolly, taking a gun from Tolly's hand.

There might have been a great deal of difficulty in dealing with Bob Banner then. The pain of his burns and the smoke that had choked him, made him illogical. He was worried about the horses in the pen; worried about Headlight and Blaze, and Bones. Despite Oliver's assurance of their welfare Bob Banner would have climbed to his feet and attended to his charges, but Bessy Oliver took command.

She said, "Let me!" and a policeman, and Bessy's father and the interne from the ambulance stood back while Bessy handled Bob Banner. The horses were all right, Bessy said, and Bones was in the ambulance. They would go and see Bones. Bessy's hand under Bob's arm helped him up and took a part of his weight while they went to see Bones. At the ambulance she got Bob inside without a great deal of trouble; the interne climbed in and the bell clanged again. Bones was moaning and the interne lit a cigarette and mumbled

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something about "first degree burns." Then he thrust a needle into Bob's arm, pushed a plunger and grunted a satisfied grunt.

BY THE time they reached the hospital the morphine had had its effect. Bob was content to lie on the stretcher.

People fussed around him. They peeled off what remained of his shirt. They undressed him. They smeared something soothing over the burns on his face and his neck and back and shoulders.

"Take plenty of carron oil to cover that," the doctor said, waving his hand at the broad expanse of burned flesh.

When they finished the dressings, Bob felt better. He was covered with bandages and only one eye was exposed, but he turned his head because he could hear moans. The sound of pain came from Bones. Bones had lost the steel he had borrowed from Bob. Bones lay on a table and a man bent over him and sewed his head. Every time the needle dipped Bones groaned and grunted. The doctor kept sewing, calm as a woman at her quilting.

While Bob watched Bones, a party came into the emergency room. There was Oliver, and with him his counterpart and his daughter. Oliver spoke to the doctor who had mentioned the carron oil and then all three of them came over to where Bob lay. Oliver looked at Bob and Bess Oliver came around the table and stood beside him, and put her hand on his fingers where they protruded from a bandage.

"How did you know about it?" Oliver asked.

Bob made no answer to that. "I didn't get throwed," he said to Bessy.

Bessy patted the fingers.

"This is my brother, John Oliver," Oliver said. "He had Ackerman's trotters insured."

It was all Greek to Bob. He kept still. If a man kept real still when there was something going on that he didn't understand, he could often learn all about it.

"Ackerman was smart," Oliver continued. "That fellow you drug out of the barn spilled the whole thing. Ackerman and his driver and that other fellow took the trotters and hid 'em. They put those plugs in the barn and set it on fire. The negro was in there an' the man Ackerman had hired to fire the barn hit the negro on the head. They'd got that girl you was with to toll you away. They didn't want you around. If you hadn't got the horses out nobody would ever have known the difference. How did you get wise, son?"

Bob Banner was burned so red that his blush did not show.

Bessy Oliver spoke to her father. "It doesn't make any difference how he knew," she said. "He was there."

"He sure was, Tom." John Oliver, who had been silent while his brother spoke, pushed forward. "I'm certainly obliged to you, Banner. You saved me plenty. The police are out looking for Ackerman."

"You're his brother?" Bob asked.

John Oliver laughed. "I'm in the insurance business back here," he said. "Tom sticks to ranching."

"I've got a place out of 'Vegas," said Tom Oliver. "The Quarter Circle L. We're about a hundred miles from the OAT."

"We're neighbors," said Bessy Oliver. Her hand was still on the bandaged hand. "You'll be well enough to go back with us when we go."

Still Bob had a question. "That brown horse," he said. "Was he hurt?"

"That stumblin' horse?" questioned Oliver. "He's all right. He'll live to make gray hairs on many a man."

Bob Banner turned his head again. His one good eye fixed itself on Bessy Oliver. Headlight was all right. Headlight had stumbled at the right time and place. "Stumbling horses make gray hairs," Tom Oliver had said. It was surely true. Because of Headlight, poor, stumbling Headlight, Bob Banner might live to have many a gray hair. Looking at Bessy Oliver, watching her eyes, Bob Banner decided that gray hairs were very desirable. He hoped that he would live a long time and have plenty of them.

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Blue-White and Perfect

By BORDEN CHASE

MANHATTAN'S midtown Broadway is a finishing school that turns out a wise-eyed, razor-witted group of graduates. Some, like Treasury Agent Smooth Kyle, are on the right side of the law; others, like Rod Martell, international gambler and member of a diamond-smuggling combine, are on the wrong side. And then there's lovely, tart-tongued Gilda, who might be on either side. Right now she's playing both ends against the middle. She loves Smooth and she wants to get him out of the Federal employ: he's hers and she wants him alive. She wants to bring him back alive—from Cuba, where Smooth has trailed sultry, beautiful Sonia Clonet, an accomplice of Martell's.

IN HAVANA Smooth learns how the diamonds are gotten into the United States. An operative named Murchison brings them on a freighter from Antwerp and drops them overboard into Havana harbor. Members of the gang in a motorboat pick them up, take them ashore and mould them inside of buttons. The buttons are sewn on Sonia Clonet's dresses and Sonia sails for New York—ostensibly as a buyer for a Havana dress shop. The smugglers also maintain a headquarters in Coral Gables. Smooth decides to investigate that. He and Gilda take a plane. Ahead of them, a plane in which they believe Martell is riding explodes and falls into the sea. Smooth, at the Miami airport, overhears a man ask if Martell has arrived. The clerk says that Martell did not leave Cuba. Smooth follows the man and locates the gang's headquarters. When he returns to the airport he finds a note from Gilda saying that she will be at the Biscayne Hotel in Miami . . .

CHAPTER XVI

PREVIEW

AN HOUR later Smooth was sitting with Gilda in her room at the Biscayne Hotel. He was studying the smoke that lifted from his cigarette as Gilda applied the final touches to her makeup.

"So you see," he said, "you weren't fooling me a bit, Gorgeous. I heard you talking to Martell—knew Sonia was scheduled to take the stones to New York—knew you were supposed to get me out of Havana."

"In other words," said Gilda, "you knew everything."

Smooth Kyle Sees a Movie, and Gets Closer to The Truth.

This story began in the Argosy for September 18

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"Just about."

"You're too smart for one guy, Smooth. You should have been quintuplets."

"My idea exactly. But why don't you get smart and stop trying to make a sucker out of me? And if you keep on playing with that crowd you're sure to get hurt, Gorgeous."

"Keep on," said Gilda. "Who with?"

"Oh, there's a few left," said Smooth. "Just because Martell is wrapped up in salt water I'm not sucker enough to believe the mob is through."

"No? Then who is running the racket?"

"I wouldn't know," said Smooth. "But I think it's about time you told me."

"Are we going all through that again?" asked Gilda.

"Have it your own way, Taffy Head. But if the Treasury Department gets wise that you're clowning around with this bunch, don't come crying to me."

"Crying to you?" snapped Gilda. "Don't flatter yourself. And while I'm thinking of it—when do we eat?"

"We don't," said Smooth. "I'm grabbing a plane for New York in an hour. Want to come along?"

"New York?"

"That's what they call it."

"Why are you going to New York?"

"To make little girls ask questions. Want to come?"

"You dope!" said Gilda. "All my clothes are in Havana. I'm practically standing in my wardrobe right now. And if you think I'm going to hit Broadway in these rags, you're out of your mind. Dirty stockings —a wrinkled dress—no hat— Why, I'm a mess."

"Absolutely," agreed Smooth. "But I'm still going to New York. Of course, you don't have to come if—"

"Someday I'll square this with you, Smooth," she said slowly. "And when I do, I'll remember all the cracks you made in Havana this morning. Come to think of it, I've been wanting to tell you a few things."

"Nix, darling!" said Smooth. "Grab your hanky and let's travel. We're due at the airport in a half hour."

Gilda followed Smooth to a taxi at the door and stepped in while Smooth gave instructions to the driver. They rolled across town to a road leading into Miami Springs. There was little said on the drive and at the landing field Gilda let Smooth check the tickets while she went aboard the plane and selected one of the more comfortable seats toward the rear. When the ship was clear of the ground Smooth passed her a lit cigarette and turned to watch the lights of Miami fade into a distant blur behind them.

He checked over in his mind the various things that had happened since the start of this peculiar case and as he fitted together the pieces of the puzzle a growing doubt made itself felt. With the single exception of that plane crash a number of events had followed in a surprisingly regular order. Smooth was willing to attribute a great deal of his success to luck but lately his luck seemed to have been crowding him. That overhead conversation between Gilda and Martell at the hotel—the phone message—Martell's trip to Miami—everything had been moving *too* smoothly.

If he took things at face value the case was just about cleaned up. Martell was dead. Sonia and Falero would be picked up in New York, the Cuban officials would clean out the mob in Cuba and that would be the end of the diamond smuggling. It was all too perfect, too exact. And Smooth shook his head doubtfully as he turned to Gilda.

"Too bad about Martell," he said. "That's a tough way to go out."

"Don't talk about it, Smooth," she answered.

"Why not? Was he a particular friend of yours?"

"Not a friend—but he wasn't the worst guy in the world. We had some good times together in Europe and he always played it on the level with me."

"Funny that he should try smuggling diamonds. I wonder how he happened to go into that line?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Probably to make some quick money."

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"How much was he paying you for your work?"

"Why worry about that?"

"Suit yourself," said Smooth. "But I think you were a chump to hook up with him."

"Well, it's all over now," said Gilda. "No more Martell—no more diamonds—no more case. What's next on the program for you?"

"Another case, I suppose."

"Don't you think it's about time you quit the Treasury Department, Smooth?"

"Still thinking about that private detective agency?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. It might be a good idea but—"

"Have you talked to your old boss about it?"

"You mean McNeary?"

"Yes."

"I mentioned it to him before I left New York. He agrees it might be a good proposition."

"Then why not get started when we get back to town?"

"I'll talk it over with McNeary when we arrive. If he okays it, maybe I'll take a crack at it."

Gilda reached across the aisle and patted his hand. She was wise enough not to argue a point after it had been won. When Smooth wanted to continue the conversation she shook her head, adjusted a pillow and went to sleep. The rest of the trip was made in silence and Gilda did not open her eyes until the plane landed at Newark Airport. A taxi took them to New York and Smooth stopped for breakfast at a downtown cafeteria. After a short argument Gilda agreed to accompany him to the Customs House where they were shown into the office of James Friedlander, head of the Bureau of Investigation, under whom Smooth was working.

WHEN Friedlander arrived a half hour later he shook hands with both of them and congratulated Smooth on his work. Gilda decided she had never seen a man who looked less like his profession than this official. He was short and round and jovial. His smile was warm and there was a disarming frankness about his expression that gave him the appearance of a round-cheeked, trusting youngster. Yet it was this same man who had made smuggling one of the most hazardous trades in the criminal world. Now he leaned back in his chair and smiled broadly as he picked up his phone.

"McNeary wants to see both of you," he said in explanation of his call. "He asked me to call him when you arrived."

"Is he in the building?" asked Smooth.

"In the next office," said Friedlander. "Don't make your report for a moment. He'll be right in."

He put through the message and a moment later McNeary hurried in to greet Gilda and Smooth. This former boss of Smooth's was far different in appearance from Friedlander. He was tall, thin and crisp in word and movement. He wasted little time in casual conversation and less in congratulation of Smooth's work. He opened a package of cigarettes, tossed them onto the desk and straddled a chair.

"Let's have it, Smooth," he said. "Friedlander tells me you've romped away with this case. Suppose you bring us up to date?"

"It's rather a long story," said Smooth, "and it starts at the time I met Gilda in Landy's on Broadway."

"A very long story," agreed Gilda with a smile. "The Boy Wonder of the Treasury Department will now proceed to pin medals all over his chest."

"Don't you think he deserves a few?" grinned McNeary.

"Sure—for being lucky. Smooth is a fool for luck. It's the only thing that keeps him alive."

"You're half right," said Smooth. "I'll admit I'm a fool, but I'm trying to overcome it."

"Glad to hear you admit it, darling," said Gilda too sweetly.

"Argue with him later, Gilda," said McNeary. "We want to hear the story."

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Smooth outlined the case from the day he had been assigned to it and rounded it out with the report that Sonia would arrive in New York aboard the *Princess Nola*. Two dozen diamonds would be moulded into the buttons of her dresses. She would be accompanied by Falero and one or more of the mob would probably be at the dock to meet her.

WHEN Smooth had finished Friedlander looked thoughtfully toward the floor and shook his head. McNeary said nothing but studied the ash of his cigarette. Gilda looked anxiously from one man to another and then turned to Smooth who was idly drawing figures on the desk blotter.

"Well," she said. "That should take care of everything. And if you gentlemen don't mind, I'd like to skip off to my hotel and find some clean clothes."

"Go right ahead," said Smooth. "I'll catch up with you later in the day."

Friedlander and McNeary stood up and bowed slightly as Gilda left the office. Then McNeary turned to Smooth and there was a quizzical expression in his eyes.

"Do you agree with Gilda that the case is closed?" he asked.

"I was about to ask the same question," said Friedlander.

"Closed?" said Smooth slowly. "It hasn't started. That smart blonde has been taking me for a ride. For a time she had me believing in Santa Claus. But I finally managed to come out of my dream and start adding things together."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Smooth," said Friedlander quietly. "For a moment I thought you had been overrated."

McNeary grinned. "I told Jack you were a good man," he explained. "While you were making your report I started to regret the recommendation."

"I don't blame you," said Smooth.

"It would appear," said Friedlander, "that Gilda wants us to consider this case closed. Have you any ideas why she wants this?"

"I can answer that," said McNeary. "Gilda is one of the smartest girls I've ever met. She's hard and cold and calculating when she deals with any man in the world except one. But when Smooth steps into the picture she's just a woman in love."

"But even so," said Friedlander, "this business of—"

"Just a moment, Jack," said McNeary. "When you know Gilda as I do, you'll realize she can be utterly ruthless when Smooth's safety is concerned. She doesn't care a tinker's damn about the Treasury Department or any other department. And if she can keep Smooth out of trouble she will work with anyone to do it."

"But how does she manage?"

"Connections," said McNeary shortly. "Every big-time crook in the country knows Gilda and likes her. In fact, her acquaintances are scattered over most of the large cities of the world. These big operators respect her and to a certain extent fear her. They know she is in love with Smooth and as a result, they are afraid of Smooth."

"That's not very flattering, Chief," said Smooth. "I'll admit Gilda is the brains of this combination but there have been times when—"

"Never mind," snapped McNeary. "I know all about your record, Smooth. But I also know you would have been stretched under a headstone in some convenient cemetery if it hadn't been for Gilda. Am I right?"

"Sure you are," grinned Smooth ruefully. "But that smart-thinking blonde hasn't done much to help me on this case."

"No?"

"Well, figure it out for yourself. She's hooked up with Martell and his mob and for a week she's been leading me around on a cockeyed chase that ends exactly nowhere."

"I wouldn't say that," laughed Friedlander. "Sonia Clonet and Falero are important members of the mob. And they're through as soon as the *Princess Nola* reaches port. Then there are a few in Cuba who are due for jail terms. And as for Martell—"

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"That's the only part that doesn't make sense," said McNeary. "The rest of it is easy."

"Yes?" questioned Friedlander.

"GILDA and Martell decided to make a case for Smooth," said McNeary. "She probably convinced Martell it would be worth some stones and a few members of his mob to have the case marked closed."

"But suppose Sonia Clonet talks?"

"She won't," promised McNeary. "She knows a few years in jail are better than a few slugs in the chest. Any of the mob who have to take a jail rap will do it with their mouths closed."

"I agree with you," said Smooth. "This is one of the toughest crowds I've ever come up against."

"But how do you explain Martell's death?" said Friedlander.

"I don't," snapped McNeary. "I'm waiting to hear Smooth do that."

"That's a nice job," laughed Smooth. "All I can say is Martell was on the plane and never reached Miami. He was—" Smooth stopped abruptly and tapped the end of his pencil against the desktop. For a moment his teeth gripped his lower lip and he said nothing. Then he turned to McNeary. "Once you told me never to take anything for granted in this business, Chief. And I think that's the answer."

"What do you mean?" asked McNeary.

"I saw Martell at the airport," said Smooth. "I saw him walk toward the plane but I didn't see him go aboard. I took that for granted. When I saw two figures in the plane I also took it for granted one was Martell. And when the plane crashed I figured Martell was dead."

"How about Gilda?" asked McNeary. "Could you tell if she thought the same?"

"She's clever, Chief. But I don't think she was acting when that plane exploded. She was sick."

"Perhaps at the thought of the pilot's death," suggested Friedlander.

"That might be it," agreed McNeary. "She knew the pilot was in no way connected with the scheme. And Gilda is peculiar in many respects. She has a code and a strict one. If one of the mob gets killed on a job, she figures that's part of the game. But the idea of an outsider getting hurt—"

"That's the answer," said Smooth quickly. "Whoever was in that plane with the pilot didn't know what was going to happen. Martell probably gave him a package to deliver in Miami. And in exactly one hour the package exploded."

"Nice, sociable people," said Friedlander quietly. "It's a wonder you've kept alive this long, Smooth. That crowd won't stop at anything."

"Oh, yes they will!" said McNeary. "In some way Gilda has convinced them it would be suicide to kill Smooth. Perhaps she's made a bargain to keep Smooth running in circles if they leave him alone. But, whatever she's done, she's made them careful."

"How about that accident on the *Princess Nola?*" asked Smooth. "If that boom had hit me I'd have been knocked off on the first day of the case."

"Perhaps Gilda was still trying to do business with the mob," said McNeary. "You'll have to admit those attempts in Havana were stupid affairs. A mob with the nerve to pull that plane crash would certainly have done a better job if they really meant business."

"You may be right," said Smooth, "but I can still see that boom heading toward me." He laughed and took a few rolls of film from his coat pocket. "When we have time I'd like to show you a picture of it. Sonia thought it would be a cute idea to keep a record."

"What do you mean?" asked Friedlander.

Smooth explained how Sonia had placed him under the boom to take his picture. He then told how he had secured the films in the house in Havana. Friedlander opened one roll and held the strip of film to the light. He studied it for a moment and then turned to Smooth.

"Where can we have a look at these?" he asked.

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"Any large camera-store will run them for us," said Smooth. "But that can wait. Just now I'd like to talk over the next step in this screwy case."

"First we'll look at the films," insisted Friedlander. He reached for his hat and started toward the door. "Come along, Mac. We'll talk about the case on the way to the camera store."

McNeary stopped in at his office for his hat and then joined Smooth and Friedlander. They left the Customs House and drove to a store on Nassau Street in the downtown business section. There was a small projection room in the rear where Smooth, McNeary and Friedlander took chairs and waited for the films to be run. A clerk put one reel on the machine, darkened the room-lights and started the projector.

THE first scene was of the dock from which the *Princess Nola* left for Cuba. People were waving and smiling as the camera swung toward the gangway. Smooth saw the group that had come to visit Sonia before she sailed. Mr. Downs, Mr. Craven and then Miss Bartlett went across the gangway—Smooth had noted their names and now repeated them to Friedlander and McNeary. Then Miss Bartlett turned, faced the camera and waved her beaded bag. Smooth remembered the incident well. But suddenly he turned and called to the operator who was running the projector.

"Hold that!" he cried. "Hold it right there!"

The machine stopped and Miss Bartlett's figure was caught with one hand above her head and the other gripping the rail.

"What's wrong?" asked Friedlander.

"That scene isn't the one Sonia took when I was aboard," said Smooth. "It looks the same but something is wrong."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure," said Smooth doubtfully. "But it isn't the same."

"You mean different people?" asked McNeary.

"No. That's the Bartlett dame. And those others are Downs and Craven but—" Suddenly he laughed. "The clothes!" he said. "The men are wearing topcoats and gloves. It was summer when I sailed—a hot day. That picture must have been made in the Spring or Fall."

"Let's see the rest of it," said Friedlander.

The projector whirred and the scene changed. The next shot was of the docks in Cuba. The *Princess Nola* was moored to the pier and a shot from her deck took in a life-preserver with the ship's name painted on it. Then the camera moved to the gangway and Smooth saw a group of people come aboard. He recognized none of them until he saw Martell pause at the foot of the gangway and wave. Martell was carrying a bouquet of flowers and a large box of candy. Smooth watched him go aboard and later saw Tibbs, the little steward, carrying a passenger's bag. Then the film cut back to a picture of the dock in New York.

Miss Bartlett had waved her bag toward the camera just once when Smooth laughed and settled back in his seat. The remainder of the film was a repetition of the first two scenes—Martell going aboard the *Princess Nola* in Cuba at sailing time, and Sonia's friends leaving the ship in New York at sailing time.

"Why the laugh?" asked McNeary.

"Don't you get it?" asked Smooth. "Don't you see how those birds are bringing in the stones?"

"What's your guess?" asked Friedlander.

"Why, this film is a record. Whoever is running this mob takes nothing for granted. Sonia uses her camera to show the delivery of the stones by Martell. Then she shows them going off the *Princess Nola* in New York at sailing time."

"At *sailing time?*" said Friedlander.

"That's the racket," said Smooth. "Sonia uses the same cabin every time she goes and comes from Cuba. The stones are brought aboard in Havana by Martell and hidden somewhere in her stateroom. When she reaches New York they are left there. Then when she sails again her friends take them off."

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"Nice work," said McNeary thoughtfully. "It was a cinch those diamonds weren't getting past the customs guards when the ship docked. But no one has ever thought of searching visitors at sailing time. That girl's bag could be loaded with diamonds and no guard would stop her."

"That's the answer," said Friedlander. "And I'll bet there is a shipment on the *Nola* right now. They'll let us grab Sonia and find a few stones. That scheme of moulding the stones into dress buttons is just a plant. It's so clever that when we tumble to it we're supposed to sit back and figure we have the case solved. But all the time they are really bringing the stones in bulk this other way."

"I heard Falero mention someone he calls 'the boss.'" Smooth said. "That bird is the brains of this outfit and he's a hard-boiled crook."

"Plenty hard," agreed McNeary. "If he ordered that plane crash, he's the type of murderer who will take some long chances."

"Any idea who he might be?" asked Friedlander.

"None at all," said Smooth. "But sooner or later he'll show his hand."

"I don't doubt that," said McNeary shortly. "But the question is—will you be alive to see it?"

"Yes, Smooth," said Friedlander. "He knows you and if he thinks you're still on the case I don't imagine he'll waste much more time. Under the circumstances I believe I'll take you off and put another man in charge."

"Don't do that," said Smooth quickly. "That's just what these birds want. They've let a half dozen of their crowd go to jail to get rid of me—that must mean I'm getting close."

"But think of the risks," said Friedlander."

"You think of them," laughed Smooth. "I want to see the rest of these pictures."

FRIEDLANDER motioned to the operator and another reel started to unwind. It was a scene on the Havana waterfront but the dock was different from that in the last picture. A well-decked freighter was lying beside the wharf and the scene was shot from the dock. The name of the ship was the *Nantes* and Smooth saw she was being loaded with bags of sugar.

"This is another shot of a sailing," he said. "They're putting cargo aboard—not taking it off."

"There's Martell again," said McNeary quickly. "See him going down the gangway?"

Smooth grinned. Rod Martell was waving back at someone on deck. There was on package in his arms and this puzzled Smooth until he saw Rod make the same trip four times.

"Get it," he said. "Martell has been visiting the freighter to see one of the passengers. Those boats never sail on schedule and he probably took the stones off a few dozen at a time."

"I don't quite follow you," said Friedlander. "Is that freighter bound for New York?"

"It doesn't make any difference where she is bound for," said Smooth. "She came from Belgium with a large consignment of diamonds and tied up at the dock in Havana. The stones were left aboard—hidden in a stateroom, I guess—and then one of the mob booked passage when she left."

"He may have gone aboard a day or two before she sailed," said McNeary.

"That's right," said Smooth. "And Martell dropped in to have a drink and a chat. But he managed to have someone on the dock make a record of each visit."

"Whoever is running that mob must be a tough boss," said Friedlander. "He checks every move."

"He sure does," agreed Smooth.

The film then showed another freighter that Smooth recognized as the one from which the package had been dropped into the harbor—the *Lille*. He laughed when he realized that transfer of a few stones had been made deliberately. It was part of a cleverly-arranged setup meant to throw Smooth completely. Martell had let him

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watch a nicely-staged play—the stones coming into Cuba, and the stones coming into the States. A few members of the mob had been tossed to the wolves, and some stones added to make the job complete. Now it was supposed the Treasury Department would call the case closed. Martell's death was the final touch and Smooth realized he was up against a fast-thinking crook in this "boss."

After shots of the two freighters the film showed a scene at an airport. Smooth recognized it as the one in Coral Gables where seaplanes landed. The camera planned to show a few planes in the water and then swung toward the hangars. A small delivery truck drove up the roadway toward the camera and the driver opened the rear doors.

Smooth ordered the projector stopped until he was able to decipher a sign on the side of the truck. It read, MIAMI SERVICING COMPANY and below it was an address on Flagler Street and a telephone number. When the film continued Smooth saw the driver take four fire extinguishers from the truck and walk toward the hangars. When he returned he was still carrying four extinguishers and Smooth saw him put them in the truck and drive off.

"What the devil is all that about?" he asked. "Can you figure it, Mac?"

"You've got me," said McNeary. "Why are these birds interested in fire extinguishers?"

"They might be very interested if there were diamonds in those extinguishers," said Friedlander quietly. "In fact, I'm willing to bet a hundred to one that's another way of bringing stones in."

"I DON'T get it," said Smooth doubtfully. "If there are diamonds in—" He stopped and pounded Friedlander's shoulder. "You're right," he said. "When I followed that guy to the house in Coral Gables I saw some of those same extinguishers on the mantel in the living room. At the time I thought the boys were being careful, but I didn't realize just how very careful."

"Do you suppose they're getting them on the planes in the same way?" asked McNeary.

"I suppose the mob in Florida do the job cheaply to get the business from the airport," said Smooth. "But they couldn't work that racket at both ends. They must use some other method to get the stones aboard."

"Let's watch the rest of the film," said Friedlander. "Maybe they'll tell us."

Smooth laughed. "Maybe they will."

The next scene was simply one of Martell going aboard a plane in Cuba. Smooth recognized the mooring and the company building. Martell turned, faced the camera and smiled. Then he went aboard the plane Later there was another shot of the truck in Coral Gables and then the film was ended.

"Where's the picture of you?" asked McNeary when they had discussed the last reel at length.

"It's there," grinned Smooth. "Sonia certainly turned that record over to her boss."

When the machine started again it proved he was correct. He saw the Bartlett girl waving her purse and then he laughed aloud when the film showed him standing on the forward deck of the *Princess Nola*.

"How do you like the profile?" he asked lightly. "Do you think I'd make good in Hollywood?"

"Silly-looking smile but such beautiful eyes," said McNeary. "As a screen player you're a washout."

"What was Sonia saying to you then?" asked Friedlander. "Was she asking you to watch the birdie?"

"Something like that," said Smooth. "She was telling me to back up and give the boom a chance to hit me."

All three laughed but the laughter stopped when the projector ran the next few feet of film. For a moment the picture of Smooth showed him smiling and turning casually away from the camera. Then he leaped and sprawled upon the deck. As the boom crashed the film blurred. It ran for a moment and then came to an end.

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"Sonia didn't do badly for an amateur," said Smooth. "Her hands shook a little but I still think she could qualify for a newsreel photographer's job."

They left the projection room and went back to Friedlander's office. For a time they discussed the various angles of the case. It was agreed Sonia and Falero would be arrested when the *Princess Nola* arrived. Word would be sent to Havana and a request made that the authorities there clean out the rest of the mob used in the scheme to bewilder Smooth. The dress shop on the Prado and the house on Avenida de los Alcaldes would be raided and Señor Armas would be asked to pick up the smuggler who had thrown the bundle from the freighter in the Havana harbor. To all intents the case would be marked closed and Smooth was to be given a short holiday.

CHAPTER XVII

A GREATLY EXAGGERATED DEATH

GILDA was alone in her room at the Hotel Continental when the phone rang and Rod Martell said he was in the lobby. She told him to come up and glanced in the mirror to check over her makeup. As she dabbed powder on her nose she talked aloud to the reflection in the glass.

"Just a sap," she said. "With about fifty million men in this country, Gilda my pet, you have to go a little goofy over a mug named Smooth Kyle. Why don't you pick yourself a nice rich old husband and let Smooth get his stupid head shot off?" She lifted her eyebrow tweezers and plucked a hair that had decided to grow out of line. Her eyes watered and she dabbed at them with a tissue, careful not to smear the mascara. She dabbed again when another tear squeezed from the corner of one eye and started down her cheek. "Stop blubbering, you fool!" she said angrily. "He'll never do as you ask him. And in the end he'll wind up with a fine dose of lead poisoning. Why don't you forget him?"

She turned away from the mirror and walked to the window. For the past week she had been seeing Smooth regularly each day. They had talked of the agency he was to open and at one luncheon McNeary had joined them and voiced his vigorous approval. He offered to back Smooth and throw a great deal of work in his direction. Smooth and Gilda had looked at offices—looked at furniture—looked at file cabinets and talked about a stenographer. They had discussed the name of the agency and Smooth laughed when Gilda suggested they call it Chumps Incorporated. But in spite of this Gilda knew he was stalling.

Something was going on behind that eager smile of his. Some plan was forming in his mind. And Gilda knew she had no part in it. The successful ending of the case against Rod Martell was mentioned occasionally and Smooth had voiced no doubts about the conclusion. This in itself caused Gilda to wonder. Had Martell fooled Smooth? Or was Smooth simply playing dumb? The Treasury Department had marked the case closed—McNeary told her that. And when the *Princess Nola* had docked Sonia Clonet had been arrested with Falero and they were now awaiting trial. McNeary had said the Cuban authorities were cleaning up the mob in Havana and at times he spoke of the death of Rod Martell.

Gilda had never known definitely about that explosion in the plane. She wondered if Martell had been crossed by his boss and sent to a flaming death over the Gulf Stream. She also wondered if this gruesome touch had been engineered by the "boss" to deceive Smooth. But when he spoke to her from the lobby she realized some lesser member of the mob had been double-crossed and sent to his death. Martell had found a substitute and cleverly slipped him aboard the plane in Havana.

There was a knock on the door and Gilda opened it. Martell smiled and crossed to a chair near the window. For a time he said nothing but studied Gilda closely. At length he lit a cigarette and tossed the match into a nearby tray.

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"Been crying, Gilda?" he asked

"About what?"

"I wouldn't know," he said. "Your sins, perhaps."

"None of them are worth crying over," she said sharply. "I don't send my pals up in a plane with a bomb."

"Cute trick, wasn't it," he said easily. "Rather spectacular, but very convincing."

"Who was it?" asked Gilda.

"Oh, just one of the mugs. It was the fellow who arrested you outside of Havana."

"Oh, I remember. One of those phoney cops."

"Yes, the tall one."

"That was a rotten trick, Rod," she said. "I don't think I know another man in the racket who would cross his pals that way."

"Don't blame me," said Martell. "It wasn't my idea."

"I suppose the boss gets the credit for that?"

"All of it. I simply followed instructions."

"He must be a nice little fellow. Do I know him?"

"Sorry," said Martell shortly. "I'd rather not talk about him."

"Afraid of him?"

"Yes."

"He must be tough," said Gilda. "I didn't think there was anyone who could scare you, Rod."

"Neither did I until I stepped into this deal," said Martell. "But I didn't come here to talk about that."

"What's on your mind?"

"Smooth Kyle. Is he convinced that he broke the case?"

"I DON'T know," said Gilda slowly. She stared at Martell thoughtfully for a moment. "I suppose another person would be anxious to sell you on the idea Smooth was fooled. But I know you, Rod. And I respect your intelligence. I think you're a pretty smart heel."

"Heel?" he said in surprise. "Is that nice, Gilda?"

"Maybe not, but it's the truth. When you hooked up with a crowd that would murder their own pals—that marked you right off the books with me. I think you're putrid."

"Always delightfully outspoken, aren't you?"

"I'm on the level, Rod," she snapped. "And that's more than you can say about your pals. When I make a deal, I go through with it. I don't copper my bets."

"Meaning?"

"That business in Havana with the phoney cops," said Gilda. "You agreed Smooth wouldn't be hurt if I could keep him out of your way. But you didn't give me a chance to come through. You tried to knock both of us off."

"Don't be foolish!" cried Martell. "That was strictly a clown act. Those fellows had orders to lock Smooth in a room and keep him here for a few days. We wanted to give him something to worry about."

"Stop kidding! One of those bums fanned a bullet through Smooth's coat."

"He wasn't supposed to."

"Save it, Rod. I'm not interested in funny stories."

Martell shrugged. "Suit yourself, Gilda. But you were saying that Smooth—"

"I was saying Smooth may think this case is closed—or he may not think so. And my guess is the second."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know, definitely. There's nothing I can put a finger on. But this week he's been too confounded nice, too agreeable to everything I say."

"And you think he suspects I'm alive?"

"Perhaps. And if I didn't think you would eventually get the same idea, I wouldn't tell you."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"Save that," said Gilda sharply. "I know you're smart, Rod. And I used to trust you. I still think you're smart but I don't trust you an inch."

"Sorry to hear that, Gilda. Does that mean our deal is off?"

"It means I expect to see you and your mob in jail."

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"Really?" laughed Martell. "What makes you so sure? We can still put a finger on Smooth whenever we have to. And with him out of the way, who would find us?"

"You should be able to guess the answer to that."

"Do you mean that Gilda Garland might even things?" laughed Martell. "Don't you suppose we would be able to find a sack to fit you?"

"Act your age! I don't claim to be a magician. But there are a bunch of boys who hang their hats in the Customs House downtown. Sometime they get rough and forget their manners. Smooth has reported everything he knows about this case. He may have reported a good deal more than you *think* he knows. If something happens to him there won't be a hole anywhere small enough to hide you birds."

"You may be right," said Martell thoughtfully. "But that won't help either you or Smooth. Revenge never brought anyone back to life."

"I know that, Rod. That's why I'm asking you to wrap up this racket while you have time. So far as I'm concerned, you and your boss and the rest of the crowd could spend the rest of your lives in jail. It wouldn't worry me a little. But because I know you are smart, I'm telling you to quit now while the quitting is good."

MARTELL stood up and paced slowly across the room. His finger twisted nervously and at times he stopped to glance from the window to the tops of the nearby buildings. Gilda waited patiently while the ex-gambler continued his pacing. It was obvious the man was worried, and at times he stopped and faced Gilda as though about to speak. As often he turned away and continued his pacing.

"I agree with you, Gilda," he said at length. "If there were any way possible I'd quit in a minute. But I can't."

"Why not?"

"I take orders from someone else. Until that man is ready to quit—I've got to string along."

"Won't he listen to reason?"

"I'm afraid not," said Martell. "If I suggested we call this deal off, I'd be asking for a one-way ride to a cemetery. He'd get rid of me in an hour."

"Why not get rid of him first?"

"I can't," said Martell. "Whenever I see him there is at least one of his crowd in the room. I I got tough—"

"Suppose I talked with him?" said Gilda. "Do you think he'd listen to reason?"

"He might."

"I'm willing to try it," said Gilda. "If Smooth is still working on the case it is only a question of days before he faces your boss for a showdown. When that comes, either one of them may wind up with a slug between his eyes. On the chance it might be Smooth, I'm willing to talk with this guy you're afraid of. I'll tell him his racket is finished and it's time for him to grab a boat for China."

"It might work," said Martell gravely. "I hope it does, Gilda. I know when a racket is getting too hot. And if it's possible I'd like to get out with a whole skin."

"Then suppose you tell me this fellow's name?"

"I can't do that," said Martell. "But if you're willing to go back to Cuba I can arrange an appointment for you."

"Cuba?"

"Yes. He's there now."

Gilda was thoughtful for a moment. Martell might be telling the truth. The man seemed worried and it was obvious he feared "the boss." She could readily understand Martell would be taking a great risk in suggesting the smuggling be stopped. From experience she had learned crooks immediately became suspicious of anyone who wanted to quit. And this man was utterly ruthless. He had proved that when the plane crashed. But there was a chance he would listen to her if she could convince him the Treasury Department was still after him. In addition, Gilda wanted to see the man—learn his name. With this knowledge she would be in a position to match wits with him.

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"I'll go," she said finally. "I'll grab a plane out of here tomorrow and talk some sense into that guy's head."

"Fine!" said Martell. "But why not go down on the boat? The *Princess Nola* is leaving tomorrow."

"*Princess*, your eye!" snapped Guilda. "I'm in a hurry."

"I'm afraid it won't do any good to hurry," said Martell. "If you don't do things the way I suggest, you won't see the boss."

"And that means I've got to go by boat?"

"Yes," said Martell. "I'll book passage for you. And I'll even send a few friends down to see you off. Sort of a farewell party."

"Save yourself the trouble," said Gilda. "I don't need anyone to see me off."

"Oh, be a sport," said Martell. "I'd come along but you know that wouldn't be smart. I'm supposed to be dead."

"If you're crossing me, Rod—Smooth will make your death authentic."

"Why should I cross you?"

"Because you're frightened," said Gilda.

"All the more reason for me to play it on the level."

"Maybe."

"Then it's all settled. You leave tomorrow evening on the *Princess Nola*. I'll have some friends see you off. Then, when you get to Havana I'll have someone meet you at the dock and take you to the boss."

"It sounds screwy," said Gilda. "But I'll play it your way."

ROD bowed over her hand and left the room. When he had gone Gilda reviewed the conversation of the past few moments. Rod was lying. And it wasn't a particularly clever lie. Definitely, he wanted her to go south on the *Princess Nola*. But why? And why had he suggested some friends come to see her off? That business of the sailing party was stupid. But Gilda knew Rod never did anything without reason. There was something behind this nicely-arranged trip and Gilda had no idea of what it might be.

Later in the day Martell phoned and said reservations had been made for her. The number of her stateroom was B23 and the *Nola* would sail at six in the evening. He told her Miss Bartlett, Mr. Downs and Mr. Craven would be her visitors at sailing time and asked her to be nice to them. When she questioned him about her appointment with the boss in Havana, Martell laughed and assured her the meeting would take place the day she arrived.

Gilda ordered some light traveling bags from a nearby store, packed them and made ready for her trip. When Smooth phoned she said she was busy and asked him to call the following day. She hung up and went on with her work. A few moments later there was an insistent pounding on her door. She turned the knob and Smooth marched into the room. He look at the bags, nodded wisely and doubled the fingers of his right hand. He lifted his fist and held it under Gilda's pert nose.

"Do you see this, Beautiful?"

"Yes," said Gilda. "And it needs washing."

"For a broken dime I'd hang it right under one of your dreamy eyes."

"Stop clowning. I'm busy."

"I'm not clowning, Gorgeous," said Smooth. "I'm mad."

"You're a little knock-kneed, too. But don't blame it on me."

"Of all the double-crossing, two-timing—"

"Such compliments, darling," Gilda said sweetly. "Did you come here to make love?"

"I came here to take you apart, Taffy Head."

"My caveman!" sighed Gilda.

Smooth swung an arm beneath her knees, another about her waist and lifted her. He carried her to a chair and dropped her not too gently into the seat. She bounced and looked at him in surprise. When he jammed his hands into his coat pockets and paraded before her she rested an elbow on the arm of the chair, cupped a hand beneath her chin and stared.

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"I'll bite," she said. "Are you rehearsing a scene from Hamlet?"

Smooth swung toward her. "Listen, Ape!" he said sharply. "You've been getting away with plenty. But this trip to Cuba is a little too much. What's the idea?"

"Cuba?" said Gilda innocently.

"Yes! Cuba!"

"Lovely place, isn't it?"

"Never mind the trick answers. I want to know why you're booked on the *Princess Nola?"*

"Have you been reading my mail?" laughed Gilda.

"Are you going to answer me?"

"Why should I? If I wait long enough you'll answer your own questions."

"Quit it, Gilda," said Smooth. "This isn't a laugh. And I think I'm entitled to an explanation."

"All right, darling. Suppose you quiet down and tell me what's bothering you."

"Plenty," said Smooth. "We've been waiting for someone to book passage on the *Princess Nola* and ask for Cabin B23. An hour ago we learned the stateroom had been reserved for Gilda Garland."

"You mean the Treasury Department has been checking on the *Nola?"*

"Of course."

"But I thought you said that case was closed?"

"I said lots of things. Just now I'd like to hear what you have to say."

GILDA smiled and pointed to the arm of her chair. Smooth shook his head and her eyes narrowed. She pointed again and looked at him. He crossed toward her and seated himself. She lifted one of his arms and put it around her shoulders. Then she tilted her head and smiled at him.

"How about a showdown?" she said. "Shall we both tell the truth, Handsome?"

"Now Gilda I—"

"Shall we?"

"Oh, all right. You start and I'll finish."

"That's better," said Gilda and kissed him. "You're a great guy, Smooth. But sometimes you're an awful chump. It scares me when I think how easy it would be for a mob to kill you. Scares me to death."

"But I—"

"But nothing. When you took this case Martell came to me and told me your number was up. His crowd didn't want to kill you because it would make trouble. But they had decided it was the only thing to do. I promised to keep you from getting in their hair if they would lay off. And what a sweet time I've had trying to make good."

"You agreed to that?"

"Certainly. I'm the stupid sort of a dame who falls in love with eggs like you and tries to mother them. Besides— I've been thinking about that home in Canarsie we were going to buy."

"I had a hunch you were putting me on a merry-go-round," said Smooth slowly. "In fact, McNeary practically called the deal."

"I was afraid of that," said Gilda. "When I talked to Martell this morning I told him you were still after him."

"So Martell really is alive?"

"Didn't you know?"

"I thought so, but I wasn't sure."

"He's not only alive," said Gilda, "but he's going right ahead with his racket."

"Where do you fit in this deal?"

"I tried to convince Martell he's heading for trouble. I told him to quit while he could. He seemed to agree but claimed someone else was giving the orders."

"This fellow they call 'the boss'?"

"Yes. I don't know who he is but I've got a date to meet him in Cuba. Martell thinks I can persuade him to wrap up the deal and quit."

"Hey! What's the idea? We're trying to catch that bird, and you're trying to steer him clear."

"Why not?"

"But you can't do that, Gilda. I work for the Treasury Department. It's my job to—"

"*I* don't work for the Treasury Department!" snapped Gilda. "I don't care a

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darn about the Treasury Department or any other department. I don't care if Martell and his boss bring diamonds into the country by the ton. There's just one thing interests me, Handsome. I want to keep you alive!"

"In other words—you're frightened of this mob?"

"I'm frightened of anyone who is out to get you."

"But you don't make deals with people like that," Smooth protested. "You don't tie in with a gang of heels."

"No?" said Gilda. "Let me tell you this, Smooth—Martell and his mob aren't fooling me. They'll cross me at the first opportunity. In fact, they've already tried it a few times. And when I get the chance I'll return the compliment in a big way."

"How?"

"How do I know? This trip on the *Nola* is some sort of a double-cross. But if I watch my step I may bounce it right back into their laps."

"Do you know why you were booked into that stateroom?" asked Smooth.

"Not yet. But I will before the *Nola* leaves the dock."

"I'll save you the trouble," said Smooth. "There are diamonds in that cabin that Martell would like to get ashore. He thinks he can do it right under our noses. And he moved you in to make the laugh a good one."

SMOOTH then told Gilda how the mob had been bringing in the stones. He explained the plan in detail and told of the pictures Sonia had taken of Miss Bartlett.

"She's coming to see me off tomorrow," said Gilda. "Martell arranged that. But I don't think he's using me just for a laugh."

"No?"

"It's a clever move, Smooth. Martell figures I'm stringing along with him until I can get you off the case. On the chance something might go wrong, he doesn't want you near the *Princess Nola* at sailing time. So—he books me into B23 and lets me figure a way to keep you running in circles until the ship leaves and the stones are off."

"Clever, these Frenchmen."

"And when I get to Cuba he'll have a reception committee waiting to drop me off some quiet dock."

"That's what he thinks," said Smooth. "Won't he be surprised when he finds you're not going?"

"But I am going, Smooth."

"Don't be a fool!"

"I've got to go. If the boss is in Havana there's a chance I may meet him."

"I'll take care of that, Beautiful. You stay in New York."

"Sorry, darling. I'm leaving for Havana on the *Princess Nola* tomorrow."

"You're *not!*"

"Don't shout, angel. It won't do a bit of good."

"Then I'm going, too."

"Oh, no," said Gilda quickly. "You follow the charming Miss Bartlett and let her lead you to Rod Martell. Naturally, he hasn't told me where he is stopping. But when you find him you may learn where he's selling the stones."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Smooth. "The mob has a chain of stores scattered throughout the country. We're sure of that."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Figure it out," said Smooth. "A small jewelry store can always support itself with legitimate sales. Whatever is made on this smuggled stuff is velvet. And it isn't hard to sell diamonds under the market. Just tell the customer the stone is a bargain—ask him to have it appraised—wink and give him some cockeyed story about distress merchandise. The customer pays cash and walks off. He's satisfied, the deal is closed and Martell and his mob make a nice profit. They don't even have to pay a sales tax or an income tax."

"Then Martell is the man you want," said Gilda. "Let me handle the boss while you clean things up at this end."

"Great!" said Smooth. "I'll run along now and tell Friedlander the setup. Radio me when you arrive in Cuba."

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He kissed her and started toward the door. Gilda was out of the chair and across the room in an instant. She grabbed his shoulders and swung him around to face her.

"Wait a minute, Bright Eyes!" she said quickly. "When are you going to stop trying to kid Gilda?"

"Now what's wrong?"

"You are," said Gilda. "I've been telling you the truth for the last ten minutes—and you know it."

"Is the strain too much, Beautiful?"

"It is when I catch you cheating."

"What?"

"Stop trying to fool me, Smooth. You're up to something."

"Oh, don't be so suspicious. What makes you think I'm—"

"Just this, Handsome—you heard me say there would be a reception committee waiting for me in Cuba to drop me off a dock. And two minutes later you agree it is all right for me to make the trip. And that isn't Smooth Kyle—not the Smooth I know."

"But you want it that way."

"Come through!" said Gilda. "What's on your mind? Are you going to make the trip on the *Nola?*"

Smooth laughed and caught Gilda's chin between his hands. He looked down at her and rubbed the tip of his nose against hers. Then he kissed her and backed out of the room.

"No, I'm not going on the *Nola,*" he said. "But I'll be seeing you in Havana, Gorgeous. I'll be wearing a flower in my hair so you'll know me."

He slammed the door and ran.

CHAPTER XVIII

BE CAREFUL, GILDA

GILDA arrived at the *Princess Nola* three hours before sailing time. She checked her ticket that had been left at the steamship office and followed a steward to B23. When he had left she locked the door carefully and tilted a chair under the knob. Then she stepped into the small parlor and made the door of this room secure. She covered the ports and started her search.

With the heel of her slipper she tapped carefully along the stateroom bulkheads, the decks and even the overhead. She pulled drawers out of dressers, poked around in the small closets and examined the bedding. An hour went past and she was almost exhausted. Still she looked. The lamps were taken apart, she crawled under tables and prodded the chair cushions. At length she stretched out on the bed and rested. There was no trace of the stones nor had she found any likely hiding place.

Her eyes happened to rest upon the cabin telephone and she unscrewed the black metal box to which the bells were attached. Her nail file bent and snapped but she kept on. Still no luck. She stepped into the small bath and methodically started tapping the walls. They were tile, artistically patterned in black and white. Each tile answered sharply to the heel tap until she came to an upper corner near the door. One sounded hollow.

Gilda pried at it with the broken file. It loosened and came free. Behind it was a space ten inches deep. When Gilda reached in, her fingers touched a chamois bag. She smiled and lifted the bag clear.

She crouched and emptied the contents on the floor mat. Diamonds—a glittering cascade of flashing stones each no larger than one or two karats. But each was a gem. Blue-white and perfect—fit to grace the slim fingers of a beautiful woman. Gilda looked at them. She lifted a few and held them to the light. She had never seen more perfect stones. And in this pile before her were hundreds—perhaps a quarter of a million dollars worth.

For a time the sheer beauty of the jewels held her motionless. Then she took a makeshift bag. Selecting three small stones, she put them aside. The others she tied securely and carried into the parlor. A row of small drawers had been built in at each end of a couch beneath the ports. Gilda pulled the bottom drawer all the way out and set the towel-wrapped diamonds in the

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space beneath. She replaced the drawer and walked back to the bath.

There were two heavy drinking glasses on the rack and Gilda smiled as she tossed them into the bottom of the tub. They shattered and she pounded the pieces with her slipper heel. She emptied the broken glass into the chamois bag, added the three stones she had set aside and tested the weight. It was light and she shook her head dubiously. A moment later she stepped to the phone and ordered some soda. When the steward arrived she tipped him and locked the door carefully. The bottle crashed into the tub and the pieces were scooped into the chamois bag. It still felt light but Gilda pulled the drawstring and replaced the bag in the opening. She fitted the tile carefully into place and spent the next few moments tidying the room.

SHE was hanging her dresses in the closet when her guests arrived. Miss Bartlett extended her hand and smiled.

"So glad to know you, Miss Garland," she said. "I'm Rose Bartlett and these gentlemen are Bill Downs and Audrey Craven. All friends of Rod Martell."

"So what?" said Gilda shortly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, sit down and shut up. I don't want to know you or your friends. And if you think I'm going to entertain you—you're crazy."

"There must be some mistake," said Downs. "Rod said you would be glad to see us."

"Yes," said Craven. "He thought you might be lonesome."

"Sonia was always glad to see us," said Miss Bartlett. "But then—she was a lady."

"In this business you're apt to meet almost anything," said Gilda. "Why not forget the conversation and get busy?"

"Busy?" said Downs. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I," said Gilda. "But you must have been sent here for some reason."

"Well—Rod Martell thought you might like to meet some of the officers before you sailed. I know them, and I could ask them to make the trip a pleasant one for you."

Gilda laughed quietly. She had purposely made it difficult for this group. She knew they wanted her to leave the stateroom and she was interested to see who would stay behind to get the diamonds. But none of them appeared worthy of a verbal battle so she walked to the cabin door and shrugged.

"Let's go," she said. She pointed to Miss Bartlett who was looking through a port. "You too, Rosie."

"I'll be along," said Miss Bartlett. "I'll join you on deck."

"Join us?" said Gilda innocently. "Why?"

"Well—I have to powder my nose."

"Do it here and get it over," snapped Gilda.

"Oh, come on, Miss Garland," said Downs. "Rose will be along shortly."

"Why doesn't she come with us?"

"If you must be rude about it," said Miss Bartlett. "I have to go where the little girls go."

"Why didn't you say so?" said Gilda and stepped out onto the deck.

Downs and Craven followed and Gilda noticed Craven was careful to close the cabin door. They escorted Gilda forward and stopped at the purser's office. Downs introduced Gilda and the officer was pleasantly cordial. Then they went back onto the promenade deck and Gilda glanced down at the crowd on the dock.

In a group of men not far from the gangway she saw Smooth. He grinned and stepped behind a pillar. Gilda saw Rose Bartlett coming along the deck and crossed toward her.

"Ready for a drink, Rosie?" she asked. "Come on back to the cabin."

"No thank you," said Miss Bartlett shortly. "I believe we'll go."

"So soon?"

"Yes. We don't seem to be welcome."

"How did you guess?" laughed Gilda.

"Do you really want to go, Rose?" asked Downs.

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"The sooner the better. I've seen all I want to of Miss Garland."

They hurried to the gangway and started ashore. Downs and Craven made a pretense of wishing Gilda a pleasant voyage but Miss Bartlett merely waved her bag as she walked to the dock. Gilda thought this must be force of habit and she smiled when she saw Smooth watching. Then she walked farther along the deck and waved to him. He waved back and pointed toward Miss Bartlett. Gilda nodded and blew him a kiss.

ON THE dock, Smooth pretended to catch the kiss and put it in his pocket. Near him were Friedlander and Bert Hammerly, another operative from the Department. Both men grinned and Friedlander nudged Smooth in the ribs.

"That will be about enough of that," he said lightly. "Let's see where Gilda's visitors are going."

"I'll follow the Bartlett dame, if you don't mind," said Smooth. "I'm pretty sure she'll lead me to Martell."

"All right, Smooth," said Friedlander. "Bert and I will take care of the others. We won't grab them until you let us know about Martell."

They separated and Smooth hurried to the taxi stand. Miss Bartlett was talking with Downs and Craven and after a short conversation she stepped into a cab. Smooth climbed into the next on line and told the driver to follow. They joined the slow-moving traffic in the middle Fifties, crossed to Eighth Avenue and turned south. Another turn east brought them to the door of a midtown hotel. Smooth watched Miss Bartlett pay off the driver and enter the lobby. He tossed his driver a bill and hurried after her.

She walked quickly to an empty elevator and Smooth stood where he could watch the indicator. The hand stopped at the tenth floor, paused for a moment and then started down. Smooth went to the hotel desk and called a clerk.

"Is there a Miss Bartlett registered here?" he asked.

The clerk glanced at the registry cards. "No, sir," he answered. "Not registered."

"How about Mr. Martell? Is he on that floor?"

Again the clerk consulted the file. "No. We haven't a Mr. Martell in the house." He paused and turned another card. "There's a Mr. Marvin on the tenth."

"Close enough," laughed Smooth. "Where are the house phones?"

"Use that one at the end of the desk, sir. It's Room 1015."

Smooth picked up the receiver and asked for 1015. When the call was put through he heard Rod Martell answer.

"Is this Oscar?" asked Smooth in a whisper.

"No," snapped Martell. "This is Room 1015—Mr. Marvin."

"Such service!" laughed Smooth and hung up.

There was no doubt about that suave voice. It carried the slightest trace of accent—enough to stamp it definitely as that of Rod Martell. Smooth made a note of the room number and walked to a phone booth where he could get an outside wire. He dialed Whitehall 4-4300, the number of the Customs House, and asked to speak with Friedlander. A clerk told him Friedlander had not returned.

It would take hours of telephoning to get permission to install a dictaphone in Martell's room. And Smooth knew the ex-gambler was a fast worker. During a ten day stop in New York, Martell might use as many as ten different hotels. Broadway gamblers usually operated in this manner when working at their trade. The "traveling crap game" was their invention—a hotel suite was rented and the location passed along to the players an hour before the game started. The following day the game was shifted to a different hotel and in this manner the gamblers usually kept one jump ahead of the police. Such a method of operation would be natural to Martell.

Smooth was watching the dial above the elevators and when he saw it stop at the tenth floor he stepped quickly into a phone booth. A moment later he saw Miss Bart-

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lett leave the car and with her was Rod Martell. They left the hotel and Smooth followed them into the street. There were no cabs at the door and Martell hailed a passing taxi. He opened the door as the cab stopped and almost pushed Miss Bartlett into the back seat. He stepped in after her, slammed the door.

SMOOTH looked about for another cab, but as often happens, there was none in sight. He sprinted along the sidewalk to Broadway and caught one at the corner. The light was changing and the driver was slow in getting away.

"Step on it!" yelled Smooth. "I want to catch that cab turning into Forty-fifth!"

"Sorry, boss," said the hackman. "I'm not looking for a ticket."

"You won't get a ticket," said Smooth. "Go ahead! Jump the light!"

The driver leaned back and opened the door. He shrugged and looked at Smooth in evident disgust.

"You don't want my cab, mister," he said. "What you need is an ambulance. They don't have to observe traffic rules."

Smooth's fist doubled and lifted. Then he laughed and jumped from the cab. This driver had said exactly what the Smooth Kyle of years ago would have answered. These "hurry up" riders were the bane of a hackman's existence.

There was no time to explain. Showing a badge would help little as the average cab driver does not like a chase. Chases sometimes meant bullets and there are enough headaches on a taxi without looking for more. Smooth ran to the corner and looked west. Martell's cab was out of sight and traffic was streaming across town. No use following now. Smooth walked into a cigar store and dialed the Customs House again.

"What luck, Smooth?" asked Friedlander when the connection was made.

"Terrible," said Smooth. "How about you?"

"Downs and Craven went to the Longacre Hotel. They've registered there so we grabbed the subway. Just got back."

"Martell is at the Endwell in Forty-sixth," said Smooth. "Registered under the name of Marvin. He came out with the Bartlett girl and I lost him."

"Why not have a look at his room?"

"Good idea. Send Bert Hammerly up here and we'll do it. I'll meet him in the lobby."

He hung up and walked back to the hotel. In a half hour Hammerly joined him and asked if he had made arrangements with the hotel manager for the search.

"No," said Smooth. "Too much trouble. Those birds want a warrant and a letter from the president. Just walk over to the desk and ask for the key. The number is 1015 and the name is Marvin."

Hammerly laughed and asked the clerk for the key. It was handed to him without question and he hurried to the elevator. Smooth joined him and in a moment they were in Martell's room. A systematic search of the baggage netted a blank. Martell was too clever to leave incriminating letters about in a hotel room.

"Looks like a washout."

"Not quite," said Smooth.

He was poking about in the waste basket and now he lifted a chamois bag. Beneath it he found a paper upon which was a pile of broken glass. He put the collection upon a table near the window.

"I wonder if Martell was practising to be a juggler?" he said thoughtfully.

"Maybe he drank a toast to the king and broke his glass after it," laughed Hammerly.

"Wait a minute!" cried Smooth. "Look at this!"

SMOOTH lifted a small diamond that had been lost in the litter. It was one of the stones Gilda had set aside from the collection. Smooth studied it thoughtfully for a moment and handed it to Hammerly.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but I have a hunch that blonde of mine has been up to her old tricks."

"I don't get you," said Hammerly.

"Gilda found the diamonds and pulled a switch."

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"Why did she do that?"

"Don't ask me. But she was clever enough to leave a stone in this mess to make our case stand up in court."

"She left three," said Hammerly as he found two additional diamonds in the pile. "Three smuggled diamonds should be enough evidence for any jury. But what did Gilda do with the other stones?"

"Guessing what Gorgeous is doing is like trying to win a lottery," said Smooth. "The chances are about a million to one you're wrong."

The phone rang and Smooth reached for it. Hammerly grabbed his hand.

"Be careful," he said. "This isn't your room."

"I know it," laughed Smooth. "I'll make a note of the call for Martell."

He lifted the receiver and winked at Hammerly. "Hello," he said. "Who's calling?"

"Florida Air Lines calling, Mr. Marvin," said a voice on the wire. "There's been a cancellation on the morning plane and we can accommodate you now. Shall we reserve the seat for you?"

"Who did you say you were calling?" asked Smooth. "This is Mr. Jones at the Hotel Cumberland."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Central must have given me the wrong number."

"Yeah. Try again," said Smooth and hung up. He turned to Hammerly and grinned. "Our pal is trying to grab a plane south. Probably wants to catch Gilda as she comes off the *Princess Nola* in Havana."

"Why did you pull that wrong number gag?"

"So they'll call later and Martell will get his ticket. I wouldn't want him to miss that trip, Bert. Because I'll be one jump ahead of him all the way."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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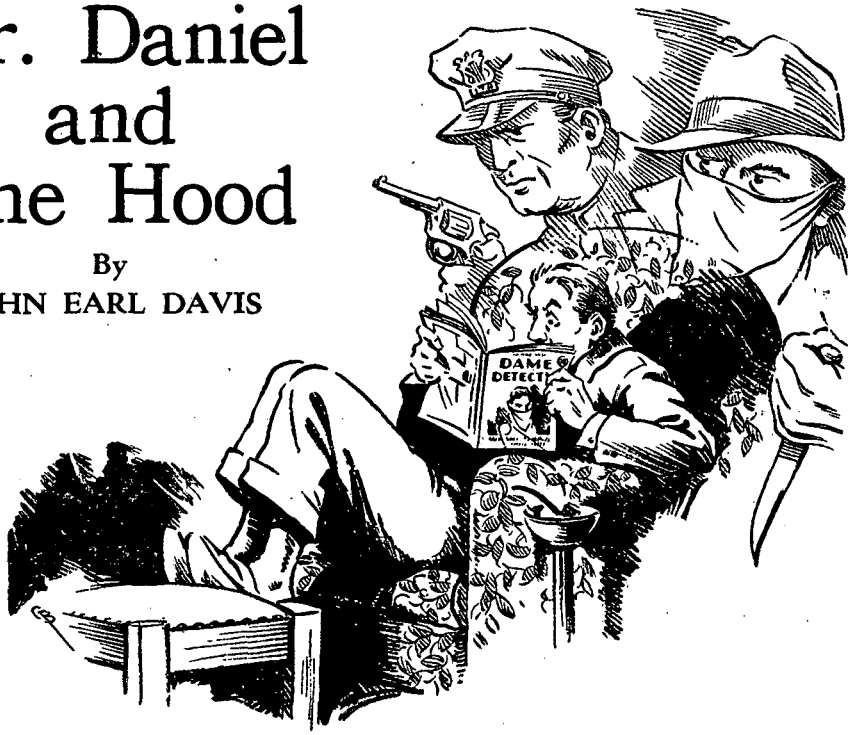
By
JOHN EARL DAVIS



FLETCHER DANIEL had regarded detective stories with a great deal of scorn until his fortieth year. "Trash," he called them succinctly; and never having read one, he easily sustained himself in this opinion.

There was a day, however, when he was coming back on the train from a business conference and somebody gave him a magazine devoted to stories of those intrepid ones who track down crime to its sources and exact swift retribution from consistently unlucky criminals. Bored with the long trip, Fletcher thumbed the pages, glanced at a story or two, suddenly became interested—and, finally, gave himself over to the devil.

From then on, most of his leisure time was devoted to pulp-paper thrillers. Not that his business suffered. Though he was a small man, partly bald, and inclined to diffidence around his own home, Fletcher Daniel was respected as a very able accountant. His office, his paragon of a secretary, his many clients constituted a distinct sphere into which no frivolity entered. No; it was that quiet interval between dinner and bedtime; or while the interminable Sunday afternoon was blending into Sunday evening—times like these—in which he built a new, briskly moving world.

This did not bother his wife—at first. Dora Daniel was as competent in her way as Fletcher was in his. Even smaller than he, she was quiet and efficient and practical in her own job, which was running the household and supervising her husband while he was there. Though she knew nothing whatever about business, she took it for granted that Fletcher worked hard during the day, and was entitled to rest in the evening. She did not read detective stories; never had and never would; but if Fletcher chose to relax in that way, she had no objection. He was a good man and he was orderly around the house, and that was enough.

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But a subtle change was coming over Fletcher Daniel's evening hours. He felt this without attempting to define it. In the old days, his post-prandial sessions with the ponderous *Ledger-Journal* had sent him quietly off to sleep when he retired punctually at eleven. Now, after a pulse-quickening session with cops and cutthroats, dicks and hoods and other hoodlums—a session prolonged beyond his bed time, despite his wife's prudent counsel—he was often unable to go to sleep. Tossing fitfully, he would picture himself with a gun in his hand (he learned to think of it as a "rod"). It was usually an automatic; and it was usually being pointed at some vicious but unlucky fellow who had started to draw just half a second later than Fletcher.

The loss of sleep began to tell. Fletcher Daniel's early morning alertness was dampened; and he became irritable in little ways. Dora watched him thoughtfully, withholding comment for the occasion which would nail her words down. Definitely, she had not planned for the occasion as it finally came.

FLETCHER had gone to bed late again. Squeezing his eyes tightly shut, trying to drive a phantom G-man out of his mind, he heard a rapid-fire series of explosions from the avenue near their apartment. It was not an unusual sound: probably a truck-motor backfiring; he had heard it many times before. But this time it gave rise to exciting speculation. Suppose, for example, it were *not* a truck-motor backfiring but a machine gun—a Tommy or scatter-gun—in action. Perhaps it was a gang killing—some poor devil being perforated in a dark entryway because he had talked. After all, there had been several murders in the past year that had been committed in the vicinity of the Daniel's apartment.

Such things can happen. All right—suppose Fletcher Daniel happened to be passing the entryway just at that time. Why not? It's a public thoroughfare. He would have seen the killers, and they would have spotted him before dashing away in their black sedan. That would make him a dangerous witness. They would know that. Gangsters have ways of finding out things like your name and address and occupation. They would come back and look for him; perhaps come directly to his home in order to shut him up.

Fletcher no longer thought about trying to get to sleep. Almost ecstatically, he saw how the whole thing might happen. There he lay in bed, facing the door, his unsuspecting spouse asleep beside him. One of these gunmen—these hoods—might even then be forcing the apartment door, creeping noiselessly through the living room and the hall, easing the door-knob.

The hood would suddenly switch on the light, and stand there facing the bed, pointing a blunt-nosed automatic at Fletcher. He would snarl a warning out of the corner of his mouth.

Fletcher lay there and decided just what should be done. He felt his hand gripping the butt of a rod; then he remembered that they had never had a gun—rod—in the house. The hood had the drop on him anyway. What to do?

On a small bed-side table at his right stood an alarm clock—a heavy, angular thing with sharp corners. He could reach it easily. He practiced once or twice, to make sure. Very well. When the light was switched on, he would sit bolt upright in bed, at the same time doubling his left leg beneath him and looking astonished. Then he would suddenly look right past the hood, through the open doorway. With utter amazement written on his features, his jaw sagging, he would croak out, "Oh my gosh!" Or something like that. Or he could just smile a little, sardonically, and say, "All right, Paul, take him," to the imaginary figure out in the hall. In either case the hood's attention would be diverted for an instant.

That would be time enough. Fletcher would bring his left foot swiftly out and down, propelling Dora out of bed and gun-range; at the same instant, swooping out with his right hand, he would reach the clock and hurl it at the intruder's head.

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Still at the same instant—or practically the same instant—he would dive out of bed straight at the fellow and catch him in the midriff with his bald spot, like a battering ram. After that he would pick up the man's rod, cover him with it (oh, the delicious feeling of a gun in his hand!), and calmly tell his admiring Dora to call the police.

REHEARSING these details in his mind, Fletcher at long last dropped off to sleep. But the drama was not over. Some time later he awoke violently, switched on the bed lamp in some alarm, and discovered his faithful wife on the floor in a tangle of covers. She looked at him reproachfully.

"We've been married fifteen years," she told him sleepily, "and this is the first time you have ever kicked me out of bed."

Nervous and very unhappy, he fussed around with the covers in a clumsy effort to help. "Darling, please forgive," he kept saying. "I had a terrible dream. I thought —I thought I was playing football. Ridiculous, isn't it?"

Dora looked at him queerly, and tested his forehead with her palm. She brought him an aspirin and a glass of water and made him take it. All she said was, "Do please try to get a little sleep now, Fletcher." But in the morning, over their orange juice, she spoke with quiet firmness: "Fletcher, I think you had better see a doctor. About your dreams, you know."

Still penitent, he said, "About my dreams. That would be a psychiatrist. Very well, dear; if you wish it I shall go, though I can't really see what good it will do." In all matters outside of business, he generally took it for granted that his wife knew what she was talking about. Besides, he was genuinely fond of her; and he liked to have her feel that she took good care of him.

So he hunted up a psychiatrist. Dr. Schutz-Wien was very dapper but very understanding. When Fletcher stammered that he had kicked his wife out of bed, and explained the circumstances leading to the incident, the doctor nodded gravely. Then Fletcher went on to tell how, since he had been reading detective stories, he had a constant feeling of holding a gun, pointing it at somebody or something. The more he talked and the more the doctor nodded, the easier it was to loosen up further.

After nodding his patient through all of that story and a good bit of life history in the bargain, Dr. Schutz-Wien asked whether he had ever had a gun or used one.

"Once," said Fletcher, "when I was a boy my uncle let me hold his revolver for a minute. But it wasn't loaded."

The psychiatrist leaned back in his cushioned swivel chair and put the tips of his fingers together thoughtfully. "It is a good thing that you came to me when you did." Fletcher started, but the doctor put up one hand reassuringly. "It is nothing to worry about. We can catch it now. You have been building up a life of phantasy which has not been compensated by your normal occupation. You need to objectify that phantasy. One good rough-and-tumble fight with somebody would probably snap you out of this in a hurry; but we can't advise or expect such drastic treatment. No, we must learn to sublimate those urges —lead them into more constructive channels. For example, if you took a boxing workout in a gymnasium once a week, that would provide an excellent release for your energies. And I should seriously recommend that you get yourself a gun and use it legitimately, for target practice. The undoubted satisfaction you will find in becoming a skillful shot will be a significant factor in your adjustment, I am sure. Finally, I might suggest that you abstain from reading detective stories, for the time at least. . . . That will be fifty dollars. I am very busy just now, but you might come in and see me next week."

Fletcher wrote a check for fifty dollars and went home in great perplexity.

"WHAT did the doctor say?" Dora asked, after she had helped him with his coat and had studied his face a moment.

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"He wants me to objectify my phantasy."

"What's that?" Dora wanted to know. Fletcher repeated the prescription almost verbatim. He hadn't intended to mention the detective stories; but now the cat was out of the bag. Dora sat with her hands folded and listened until he was through. Then she said, "I think he's right about your reading. You'd better get interested in something else, if that's what's been causing this restlessness of yours. As for boxing, I can't imagine your ever doing that at your age. And of course you can't have a gun. Even if the police would let you, I wouldn't have one in the house. Besides, where would you go for target practice? Not in this apartment, I hope. Certainly not on the street."

Fletcher was pained by this reaction, though he did not say so. Here he had spent fifty dollars and learned that he ought to objectify his phantasy; and what did it come to in the end? He had to stop reading detective stories, and he couldn't have a gun. He wished he hadn't gone to the doctor at all. He went about brooding, still feeling the phantom gun-butt in his hand; and his craving for detective stories drove him almost to desperation. He yearned for them as a drug addict yearns for his normal solace.

Now his secretary, Miss Gilheany, began to notice his harried look, his daily increasing nervousness. She asked whether he was feeling well. Not knowing what to say, he only muttered incoherently. At home Dora worried about him, tried to "build him up" with hearty food and suggestions that he get more exercise; but it was no good. For the first time in his life, he began the active practice of deceit. He sneaked in detective-story magazines under his coat and hid them. He read them furtively after his wife had gone to bed: then gave them to the service elevator boy. A shifty look came into Fletcher's eye, and stayed there.

In this state of mental and emotional disintegration, he found that the possibility of being confronted by a hood now assumed real proportions. He worried not about his condition, but about the possibilities of sudden attack at night—and he unarmed. He began to spend his lunch hours visiting the sport shops, looking at guns, gloating over them. Especially automatics.

A man's redemption may sometimes hang on a very small matter. One day, looking about the shops, Fletcher discovered a water pistol made in the shape of an automatic: a beautiful little weapon and, for a water pistol, a powerful one. He bought it immediately; filled it; carried it about in his coat pocket, his hand secretly caressing it. Later in the day, a vague feeling of damp discomfort led him to the discovery that his new weapon was leaking a little. He didn't mind the discomfort so much as he worried about discovery. Somehow, he had no desire to confide in Dora on this matter.

But small defeats lead to the greater ultimate victories. He found a shop where they did things with leather, and had a shoulder holster made. Detectives, he knew, always had shoulder holsters. He directed that this one be lined with rubber.

NOW briskness returned to Fletcher Daniel's step, and confidence to his features. He looked people in the eye as he had never done before; he was even a little arrogant about it. Except with Dora. As always, her level gaze took the jauntiness out of him; made him realize that, like the cosmos, he was subject to rules. But with the buoyance of his new elation, he undertook to bring detective-story magazines home openly again, assuring Dora somewhat airily that he now felt much better. The doctor, he reminded her, had suggested a change in reading "for a time."

While his lady was about her chores he locked himself in the bathroom, practicing drawing and marksmanship with his gun. In time he became deft and rapid on the draw; and his accuracy was about as good as you could expect with a thin stream of water. He always mopped up carefully after each session.

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Being more sure of himself did not make him any the less wary of crime. He got into the habit of casting what he felt was a shrewd and discerning eye on all about him, feeling his high secret satisfaction at the gun in the waterproof holster beneath his coat.

So one day when Miss Gilheany asked to get off half an hour early, he was immediately on guard. It meant something. Probably nothing wrong, of course—Miss Gilheany was a nice girl—but there was a plot, a complication somewhere. Her explanation was reasonable enough, though. She had a very special date that night for dinner and theater; and she wanted a little extra time to "have her hair done."

Fletcher liked Miss Gilheany, in a perfectly impersonal sort of way. She was a competent secretary, and he didn't know what he would do without her. She was a handsome girl, too; he rather hoped the young man tonight would be deserving of her company. He had planned to be out most of the afternoon; but he said he would arrange to be back by 4:30 to "cover the office." Covering the office was a very important thing to the businesslike Mr. Daniel.

He walked in at exactly 4:30. Miss Gilheany already had her hat on. "You're here," she cried, dashing out past him and smiling gratefully. "Thanks a lot." She certainly was in a rush.

How much of a rush became apparent when Fletcher discovered her keys in the door of a little safe that was part of the filing cabinet. Unusually careless, he thought—even if the girl was in a hurry. Before locking the safe, he took a quick look inside to make sure that nothing had been disturbed. Suddenly he gasped and bit his lip.

The petty cash was gone!

Mr. Daniel had always insisted on having a petty-cash fund in the office "for emergencies." For years, exactly five dollars had been kept in that little safe. It was never used: when they needed stamps, Miss Gilheany made out a check for him to sign; and when she bought office supplies, she charged them to his account. But now that $5.00 was gone.

Fletcher saw it all in an instant—or thought he did, anyway. His secretary, whom he had always trusted, had run off with that five dollars—all the money she could get her hands on in the office. That explained her haste, of course; her fright had made her forget the keys.

Crime had at last come home to roost. Crime in his own office! It's incredible, he thought, but it has happened. Then he decided that he hadn't ever really liked Miss Gilheany very much anyway; she was a little too bossy, and you ought not to trust that kind too far. He thought he remembered, now, that he had caught a sneaky look on her face once or twice. She would have to go, of course; he could not have that sort of thing around his office. What if she should try to stick him up some time? He patted his left side nervously.

When he got home he told his wife that it was getting so you couldn't trust anybody. Hearing the details, Dora reserved judgment, merely saying, "Mm," and "Ah," and such noncommittal things. This annoyed Fletcher the more, and it took two aspirin tablets to get him to sleep. He got up in thoroughly bad temper, bolted his breakfast, and went to work early with scarcely a goodbye for Dora. This was unusual.

HE was in his office before nine, waiting for Miss Gilheany to come in. He puttered around his desk impatiently, trying to convince himself that he was busy, but actually able to concentrate on nothing but his indignation. It was necessary to concentrate on that anyway; for Mr. Daniel was ordinarily a mild-mannered gentleman, and this heat could not be kept up indefinitely. More or less realizing this, he became the more impatient to have it over; and thus his emotions were able to feed themselves on their own smoke, like these new contraptions the engineers are devising to save fuel.

At exactly two minutes past nine Miss

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Gilheany tried her key in the door, found it unlocked, and swung into the office. Still remembering the music and the laughter and the complete success of the night before, she smiled very happily at Mr. Daniel.

"My, but you're early," she said. "Setting me a good example?"

To Fletcher that smile was a cover-up. He looked severe without half trying.

"Don't bother to take off your hat, Miss Gilheany. I'm sorry, but you know crime doesn't pay. You took money out of the safe last night before you went out of here. Don't try to deny it. Your keys were in the safe door."

"But Mr. Daniel—"

"You *don't* deny it, do you? I do not wish to prosecute; but of course you can no longer remain as my secretary. You may keep the money, as there is just about that much salary due you. And now good-day."

Miss Gilheany's face was crimson. "Mr. Daniel," she protested, "this isn't at all like you. I took the five dollars, but I left—"

"Exactly. You left in a hurry, fearing you would be caught." Fletcher felt his inward righteous strength increasing. "I thought I could trust you, and I find I can't. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

Miss Gilheany was too enraged to speak further. She whirled and strode out of the office, trying to slam the door after her. In this she was frustrated by the door stop.

That morning was in some ways the worst Fletcher had ever spent. There were piles of work to be done, and no Miss Gilheany was there to route them and manage them in her smooth, assured fashion. Everything he touched seemed to bring up questions he couldn't answer; twice he caught himself relaying questions to her desk. At noon, still determined to cover the office, he sent out for a sandwich and a bottle of milk.

He was bent over his desk, trying to compose a classified ad for a new secretary, when the office door opened and a man walked in. He was tall, long-faced, rather slouchy in appearance; and the brim of his dark soft hat shaded his eyes. He glanced quickly about the office. Trying to case the joint, maybe. Fletcher thought he was a decidedly suspicious character.

"You are Mr. Daniel," the man informed him. His voice seemed touched with a note of contempt. "My name's Gilheany. My sister worked for you."

Fletcher's nerves had been on edge for hours. He did not ask the fellow to sit down. Instead he got up and stepped clear of his desk. His mind, he believed, was working with clock-like precision. Gilheany had come for revenge; and Fletcher knew what he had to do. His left upper arm pressed at the bulk beneath it.

"I cannot discuss your sister," he said coldly.

"Okay," Gilheany said. "Talk is wasted with you. But I came here, Mr. Daniel, to pay you back—" His left hand went inside his coat.

A southpaw of crime! A left-handed hood! At last, the test of long hours of practic in the bathroom. Fletcher beat him to the draw. "Hold it," he snapped.

GILHEANY looked utterly dumfounded. He stared at the gun as if it were a rabbit just out of a conjuror's hat. Then he smiled—a twisted sort of smile, as if he thought this was a silly joke. Still keeping his left hand inside his coat, he said, "What's the idea? Put that toy down." He took a step forward carelessly.

Fletcher was in a panic; but his reflexes worked for him. He squeezed the trigger—hard—and a thin stream of water splashed Gilheany's face, dripping down on his necktie. Not stopping to see the effect, Fletcher dove, trying to aim his bald spot at the fellow's midriff. He was short; Gilheany was tall. The bald spot connected with Gilheany's legs, and they both went down together. The telephone went with them. Fletcher bawled for help, remembering that in situations like that, central operator always heard the screams and sent the police. Then he remembered that it was a dial phone, with the operator replaced by a mild impersonal buzzing. He

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remembered, too, that it was the lunch hour, and that most of the offices in his part of the building—the sluggards—were closed at this time. His nose was on the floor, and so was his gun; but the gun was useless now. Gilheany was on him, grunting and swearing. Gilheany rolled him over and sat on his chest. Disgust was evident on that long face of his.

"Crackpot! First you fire my sister for nothing, then you get playful with me. What's the idea?"

Fletcher tried to glare at him, but the fight was gone. "You came to pay me back," he said bitterly. "I saw you reach for your rod, but I was certainly too quick for you."

"Rod?" Gilheany repeated the word with a rising inflection, and frowned as if mightily puzzled. "Rod? Oh, I see; you mean a gun. Me reach for a gun? Phooey! I came to pay you back that five dollars my sister took out of your office. Shut up, sap! You wouldn't let her explain; now you'll listen to me. She went out in a hurry because she had a heavy date, like she told you. She didn't have enough money for her marcel or whatever it is, and borrowed your five because it was an emergency. Borrowed it, understand? She left a slip in the box, but I suppose you can't read. She brought the money back this morning, but you wouldn't listen to her and she finally got mad and left. I don't blame her. She shouldn't work for a lunatic."

He gave Fletcher's frame another emphatic shake.

"Please let me up," Fletcher gasped. He was shaking all over. "A slip? She left a slip in the box?" He tottered to the filing cabinet, pawed nervously in the safe, and found a typewritten memo, with Miss Gilheany's initials scrawled at the bottom:

***Memo:* Mr. Daniel**
***From:* Miss Gilheany**
***Re:* Petty cash**

Gilheany temporarily insolvent at 4:30. Taking short term loan, $5.00 from petty cash until tomorrow morning. Getting feathers fixed for heap big powwow. Will charge repairs and alterations, and take up note promptly without demand.

FLETCHER dropped into his swivel chair and leaned weakly on the desk, reading the memo over a second time. He looked very miserable indeed. "I'm—I'm sorry. I must have overlooked this last night. I—oh, believe me, sir, I'm terribly sorry."

Fletcher's eyes were pools of pathos, misty with eagerness and blinking with shamefaced dismay. What had he done?

He gulped, struggled to get a grip on himself. "I have made a terrible mistake. Two mistakes in fact. I've been—very nervous lately. Run-down, I guess, and—and hasty. I hope that's over. If you can get your sister to come back to work, there'll be five dollars more in it for her—every week. I really need her here; and I want to apologize."

Gilheany was brushing himself off. Fletcher cleared his throat and went on, "I was very stupid just now, Mr. Gilheany. I'd like to make this right with you somehow."

Gilheany took out the five and put it on the desk. He looked a little embarrassed. "Forget it," he said.

"Well," Fletcher said, feeling a little empty himself, "will you have lunch with me anyway? I want a chance to prove to you that I'm not entirely crazy."

"Can't. I have office hours too. Thanks just the same. But I'll talk this over with my sister. She might cool off; she always liked you before you went batty this morning. She even thought you were a good boss."

"Thanks," said Fletcher weakly, looking very much abashed.

Gilheany started out the door, then turned. "You better lay off those water pistols," he said.

Fletcher picked up the rod and threw it in the waste basket. "I will," he said. "I—I have at last objectified my phantasy."

Gilheany looked at him hard for a minute, but couldn't think of anything to say.

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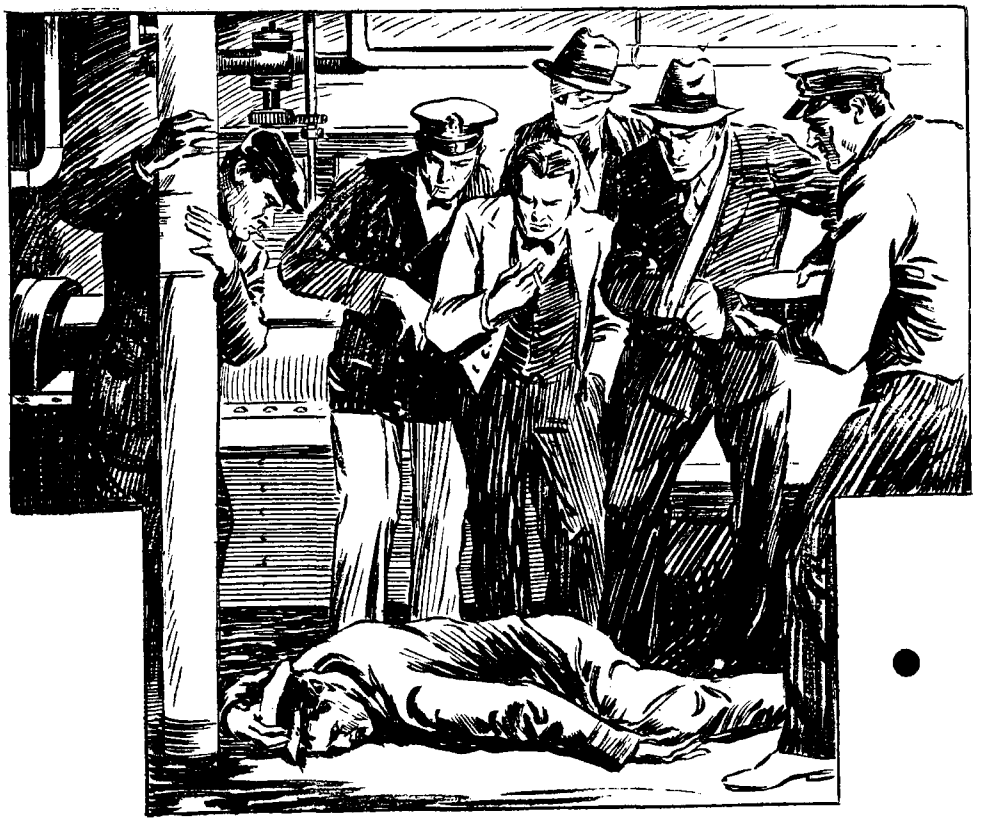

Stunt Man

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

WHEN movie stars face danger on the set, they demand a double. So, when Dexter Hathaway's mystery-enshrouded past caught up with him, the actor sent out an S.O.S. for stunt-man Jerry Banning to take his place, while he ran off to the South Seas.

Banning, coached by Hathaway's secretary, Erl Gorley, manages to fool almost everyone at first, even the blackmailers who have threatened Hathaway's life—even Cliff Furber, Hathaway's best friend, and Maida Watkins, Hathaway's co-star, with whom, incidentally, Banning happens to be in love.

In accordance with his contract, Banning puts himself on the spot by refusing to accede to the blackmailers' demands, and, trying to fight back, he makes every effort to discover the carefully-veiled identity of the "Chief," who knows Hathaway, but whom neither Hathaway nor Gorley knew.

Exasperated by Banning's continued success in evading his demands, the Chief arranges by telephone that Hathaway-Banning shall give a cocktail party on the Hathaway yacht, the *Adventurer*. He assures Banning that any list of the fifteen or twenty people Hathaway would be most apt to invite would, unwittingly, include him. Banning sends out the invitations, puzzled but determined.

Maida Watkins balks at inviting Florida Craig, a tempestuous girl who had once meant something in Hathaway's life. But Banning insists. Florida has helped him out of one jam with the blackmailers, and, furthermore, Florida knows that he isn't really Hathaway and has given him forty-eight hours to produce the star, whom she fears has been kidnaped.

Banning decides that he needs some help,

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so he sends for "Sleepy" Smith, a fellow stunt-man, and in a phone conversation, gives himself away to Smith. That makes two people who know he isn't Hathaway—but Banning is determined to go through with the yachting party.

Then comes the final blow. The captain of Hathaway's yacht has been run over and killed. Banning would have thought nothing of that—except that he remembers that the surgeon who changed his face to look more like Hathaway's has also been "accidentally" put out of the way . . .

CHAPTER XIV

A LIST OF FRIENDS

A DOZEN times I went over the guest list that Maida and I had prepared, wondering which of the seven men on it might be planning to murder Dexter—Hathaway—me! But it was no use. Checking them off, one by one, simply did not accomplish a thing. Sleepy Smith, of course, could not even be figured among the suspects. Sleepy was my best friend, and I knew he had no reason to hate Dexter Hathaway, whom he had never seen off the lots.

Moe Block and Ansel Bittner both made money from Hathaway's career, the former through the pictures Hathaway made, the latter through a ten percent commission on every nickel the actor drew down from his studios. Obviously these two had everything to lose and nothing to gain from Hathaway's death. I hesitated at the name of Cliff Furber, remembering his interest in Maida Watkins. Jealousy could be a powerful motive. But the motive in this ruckus was not jealousy; it had to do with rascality and doublecrossing far outside the law. Furber's activities among the independent producers were, according to Gorley, well known. He had been Hathaway's friend for a long time. So I crossed Furber off the list.

Clyde Macklyn wasn't much of a suspect, either. In pictures he played the menace, the guy who was always sneaking around and stealing the gal, or putting the hero over the jumps. But from what I had seen of him around the lots he was a good egg. He got plenty of work, made a grand a week. Why would he be all involved in a thing like this? I crossed his name off, but put a tiny question mark after it.

And that left only Ray Meredith, the singing star of stage and screen, a happy-go-lucky, generous, popular lug who was a push-over for any extra or bit player who came to him with a tear and an outstretched palm. You could no more figure him running a gang of murderers and acid-throwers than you could figure Maida as the Chief of the syndicate. Having reached the end of the list I threw down the pencil in disgust.

The fact was that the Chief had not even said he would be on my guest list. He had simply said he would be aboard the yacht. It was entirely likely that he would plant himself among the crew. He might even be captain. Yet I remembered that uneasy feeling I had when I put down the phone after talking to him—the feeling I had heard that voice before. But checking back over the list and trying to remember the voices, didn't accomplish a thing. Nor did checking my list against those of the other parties Hathaway had given. Except for Sleepy Smith every one of my guests had been among those invited to both affairs.

SO I went to the phone on my bedside table and began trying to locate Sleepy Smith. He was apparently hard at work getting rid of the hundred dollars he had already earned. I called seven joints before I finally got him.

"Sleepy, this is Dexter Hathaway again," I said.

"Sez you!" he retorted flippantly.

By the sound of his voice I knew he was pretty tight.

"Are you sober enough to take down a list of six names?" I asked him.

"I hate paper work," he drawled. "It'll cost you another hundred if I have to bring my brains to your darned party. You're inviting me for my good looks and, I suspect, for my muscles. For anything extra, there'll be a charge."

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"You'll get the extra hundred," I snapped. "Now take these names down."

"Shoot," he said and hiccoughed.

I read them off. "The first thing tomorrow morning I want you to start checking on those names. Find out which of them own yachts—"

"Prob'ly they all do," Sleepy mumbled.

"Maybe so, but find out. Most important of all, I want to learn whether any of them are known to be expert yachtsmen—sailing their own boats, entering the Honolulu race, things like that."

The languor oozed out of Sleepy's voice. "You sound worried. Anything the matter?"

"My own yacht captain was killed—apparently by accident—just a few hours after I planned this cocktail party. It might be murder. The party tomorrow might be rough. And when you come tomorrow afternoon, I want you to be packing a gun."

"Hot ziggedy!" he crowed, and my heart warmed at the sound of his voice. "Are you still Dexter Hathaway?"

"Any time I'm someone else," I snapped, "I'll tell you."

"The boys are all here," he said, happily, "and I think somebody besides me may have bought a round of drinks. I'd better see before some of these rum hounds lap it up. I'll be seeing you."

"Hey, Sleepy!" I roared into the phone. "If you get that dope for me, call me—"

But he had cut off. I did not bother to call him back. He probably would not have answered. Just as I put the instrument back on its little black stand, I heard another click.

I kicked off my shoes, raced through the hall and down the stairs, but there was nobody listening at the library phone. Slowly climbing back to my room, I wondered how many extensions there might be in this great hotel of a house. If there were more than two, I could take it for granted that somebody had listened in to my call to Sleepy Smith.

The old mainspring was getting wound up, and it wouldn't be long now before something started to tick. Tomorrow, I thought, would be the big day. If I could jam my way past that, I could jam my way past anything for the full term of my contract—a year.

Contract? That reminded me. I hadn't seen that piece of paper since I had put it in the inside pocket of my checked sports-coat a few minutes after the original Dexter Hathaway and I had signed it and Erl Gorley had appended his name as witness. I veered away from my course toward the bottle of scotch and went to the closet. There were scores of suits there; except that they were just a shade on the full side, I could wear them all—had already begun to wear them. I found the checked sports-coat, fished feverishly in the inside pocket. The contract was not there! Just to make sure I searched the pockets of all the other suits I had taken to the Arrowhead cottage with me. But it was not to be found. I marched across the room and reached with a stabbing forefinger toward the call-bell which would have summoned Erl Gorley. Then I changed my mind. If the thing had been lost, it was lost. Gorley hadn't found it; if he had, he'd have brought it to me, always provided he was honest. If someone had stolen it, Gorley wouldn't know—unless he, himself, had done the stealing, in which case he certainly wouldn't confess unless I took more drastic steps that I wanted to take before I became convinced in my own mind he was a crook.

So in the end I turned away from the call bell, downed another slug of scotch and turned in, wishing I were in that joint with Sleepy Smith and the rest of the gang.

CHAPTER XV

LAST WARNING

ALL the next day I waited for Sleepy Smith to telephone me about the guest list, but he didn't call. I rang up his agent and two or three of his friends, but none knew where he was. I called up both airports, the Universal and the Para-

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mount lots, but he had not been at any of these places. I called Mammoth and Colossal and then began on the bars, and here I got my first results. He and five or six flyers and stunt men had been pitched out of the Brown Derby just after midnight. They had been persuaded to leave Levy's peacefully at two in the morning, but at four they had caused such a disturbance trying to crash the sancrosanct doors of the Trocadero that a riot call had been sent to the police. At five-thirty they had apparently attempted to kidnap five pretty curb girls from one of the drive-in sandwich shops out Beverly Hills way. Complaints had been placed against them not by the girls, most of whom had been kidnaped before, but by the proprietor, a man of no humor and less judgment, who now possessed the world's most spectacular black eye.

So that was that, I told myself about noon. No one knew better than I how small was the chance of getting in touch with Sleepy Smith now. He and the rest might wake up two or three days from now in the jug at San Francisco, or in some flea-bitten cuartel in Old Mexico. Or even, as had once happened, in the royal suite of the *Lurline,* Honolulu-bound, without enough cash between them to tip the stewards.

Early in the afternoon I thumbed through the classified section of the telephone book, thinking of calling up a private-detective agency and asking them to place a couple of tough mugs among the crew of the *Adventurer*. But up until now I had always been able to break my own eggs, and I was getting too old to get used to the idea of calling upon outsiders to help me. So I closed the book with a slam and pitched it into a far corner of my room.

About three o'clock Erl Gorley reported that he had found a new master for the *Adventurer*. Excellent references, which he had personally inspected and investigated. The man's name was Dunkler, Gorley reported, as if that made a difference. Also, said Gorley, all our invited guests would be aboard fifteen minutes before sailing time. For an instant my heart leaped at the thought of seeing Maida on the white decks of a yacht under a Pacific moon. And then I remembered that somebody else had promised to be aboard, too—the mysterious man of the syndicate—and that gave me a different kind of a kick. I went to work on my .45 and got it well cleaned and oiled. I strapped on my armpit holster and, feeling a little silly, practiced a few quick draws in front of the mirror. Once I had been pretty good at that. It was a relief, after a little practice, to find I could still go for my gun without too much waste motion.

At four o'clock I made one more effort to locate Sleepy Smith, but neither he nor any of his fellow roisterers had been seen in their usual haunts all day.

So whatever I had to face that evening, it was up to me to face it alone. Well, that was all right. I could stand it; I'd stood things alone before this. How could you be more alone than in a delayed-opening fall, dropping six or eight thousand feet before—according to your contract—you could pull the old ring? How could you be more alone than flying the mails in the old days before you had someone at the other end of the radio to think for you, tell you when to sit down—do everything but fly the plane for you? I had done that, too. How could you be more alone than while poised at the edge of a cliff, with a raging stream fifty feet below you, waiting for the director to yell, "Camera!" while the perfumed star for whom you were to double sat under an umbrella making bets against your coming out of your dive with anything short of a broken back? Sure, I could take it alone. But just the same, I wished I had been able to find Sleepy Smith.

THAT was the year yachting was in. Three years ago every actor and actress who could afford one—and many who could not—had a plane, although most of them flew no higher than you could throw a freight train by the cow-

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catcher. The next year you were out if you didn't have a flock of polo ponies. And the year after that the stars had a competition to see who could buy the biggest, fanciest, most useless *rancho* in San Fernando Valley.

But as I say, that was the year the stars were "too simply wild, my dear, over yachting." Brokers from Wood's Hole, Massachusetts, to Seattle, Washington, cleaned up, and yachts whose seams were so open a cat could have crawled through were sold at fancy prices. Even extras took to wearing yachting caps with disks (bootlegged) of clubs whose yacht basins they had never seen, nor ever would.

And Dexter Hathaway, characteristically, had gone the whole hog. A Wall-Street plunger had thrown the *Adventurer* on the market at a sacrifice one dark day when he had been run through the wringer. Hathaway's yacht-broker in New York had spotted the bargain and a single long distance call to Hollywood had closed the deal. Five weeks later the *Adventurer,* a splendid Diesel craft of one hundred and fifty-six feet over-all, had plowed proudly into the Santa Monica basin.

Erl Gorley pointed her out from the top of the bluff overlooking the sea. She was a lovely thing, clean of line, slim of hull, with a single funnel, two military masts, a straight stem and a cruiser stern. Looking down at her as the purple limousine began to descend to sea-level, I determined that whatever time might be left me as Dexter Hathaway's double would be spent aboard that beautiful craft. Almost I could imagine heading with Maida out into the Pacific on our honeymoon!

From the pier-side, the *Adventurer* was even sweeter to look at than from a distance. No streak of rust marked her immaculate white hull, no bit of brightwork was shabby. An officer and a seaman stood at the upper end of the gangway, their dress whites so crisp you could almost hear them crackle.

"Hi, Dex!" Cliff Furber called from the rail. He was standing with Maida, looking down at us with a broad smile on his face. He was impeccably clad in yachting togs, double-breasted blue coat, white slacks and shoes and a yachting cap perched jauntily over one eye. I grinned up at him, but the one I really looked at was Maida. Never had I seen her so excited, even just before they were getting ready to shoot a big scene in one of her pictures. She smiled down at me in a way that seemed to tell me she and I owned some glorious secret —and, of course, we did! Behind Maida were two or three others and from the sound of the laughter coming from the stern and from the deckhouse windows I judged the stewards had already started the liquor floating.

With quite an effort I pulled my gaze away from Maida and glanced forward toward the pilot house. Standing in the open doorway was an officer, a powerfully built man of about middle age. He was not moving, yet there was about him an impression of controlled and waiting energy, ready to burst into an explosion of action at any moment.

"The new skipper," Erl Gorley said.

"Hey," Cliff Furber called from the rail, "when do we start?"

I TURNED and was just about to set foot on the gangway when a tall, gangling, moody-faced young man wearily detached himself from a bollard upon which he had been roosting.

"Well, here I am," he said, gloomily. "That toy officer up the gangway wouldn't believe I had been invited to the party. He wouldn't let me aboard, even when I offered to kick his teeth in."

I hurried toward him, trying not to let the observant Gorley see how glad I was. "Sleepy," I burst out.

"Yeah," Sleepy Smith admitted. "Now lead me to the liquor. My system's had a lot of wear and tear lately. I need a drink".

I can't tell you how good it was to have him standing there before me—this tall, somber-eyed, reckless man whom I could trust with anything—especially my life. All these others, the guests on deck, the crew—even Maida—were strangers. Some

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of them might be enemies. But Sleepy was my friend. I turned to Erl Gorley, who was standing uncertainly behind us, his questioning gaze shifting from Sleepy to me and then back again.

"Go on board," I said. "We'll be up in a minute."

Sleepy's gaze wandered appreciatively over me. "Beautiful!" he murmured. "Just beautiful. Nice yachting-cap, pretty blue coat, with braid on the sleeves and everything. The stunt business must be improving."

"Cut it, Sleepy!" I snapped, glancing around me and up at the deck. Maida and Furber were watching us with frank interest, and so was the officer at the gangway.

"Your nose is prettier now," Sleepy went on in half a whisper, "and you've been plucking your eyebrows. You've raised a new mole on your left cheek and, by the long gray beards of the Seven Sutherland Sisters, you've got rid of that scar on your chin. Do you suppose they could do something for my scar? Let me show you my operation—"

"If you don't shut up, I'll bust you one," I snapped. "Did you check that list I read to you on the telephone?"

"Yeah, and a couple of those babies are pretty fair yachtsmen. Meredith, the crooner, and Furber and Plock all have—"

He was interrupted by a commanding blast from a motor car right beside us. Florida Craig, at the wheel of a bright red coupe, skidded to a stop.

"Hello, Dex," she said, then looked at my companion. "The bird who shinnied up the rope in that Coast-Guard opera," she added. "By name, Sleepy something."

"I'll have to change the name," he said, grinning. "I haven't slept since I saw you working in that picture."

"Is he invited to the party?" Florida asked me. "If he isn't, bring him aboard. I like him."

"He's invited," I said. "Come on aboard."

"Just a minute," Sleepy said. "There's some dirt, or maybe a blond hair, on your jacket." He brushed vigorously against the left breast of my yachting coat. His palm smacked full against the hard bulk of the pistol in my arm pit holster and for the tiniest instant his eyes met mine. "Up to your old tricks, aren't you, Mr. Hathaway?" he asked, mockingly.

"A blond hair?" Florida asked. "Let's see it."

Her sultry gaze swung up to the rail where Maida's head shone like a burnished halo.

"Sorry," Sleepy said blandly, "it blew away."

Going up the gangway I braced myself against the inspection of the officer and the sailor, but they saluted punctiliously and did not take a second look at me.

"Everybody aboard?" I asked the officer.

"Yes, sir."

"Let's shove off," I said, anxious to be away from the dock.

The breaks were with me on deck. Most of the group of guests had already had a couple of cocktails and were feeling so good they had, in the Hollywood manner, practically forgotten their host. Some of them greeted me with a wave of the hand, others hardly knew I had come aboard. Maida and Cliff Furber wandered over and I introduced Sleepy, not mentioning that he was a stunt man. But Maida mentioned it and Furber's interest was immediately evident. If he was astonished that Dexter Hathaway had suddenly formed a friendship with a stunt man, his manners were too good to show it. Right away he began to ask about planning stunt work, timing the falls. I wandered away to join the others.

THE deck began to thump softly beneath our feet and the bow of the *Adventurer* swung slowly away from the pier. The deck steward passed another round of champagne cocktails. Unashamedly Sleepy took two, one in each hand. The sound of conversation and laughter increased. Everything seemed jake.

"You're looking as well as I ever saw

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you, Dex," said Moe Block, my producer. "What's this hooey about your being sick? I'm going to start you and Maida to work next week. We have the finals on the script and we're ready to shoot."

"At a fat increase in salary," said Ansel Bittner, who was apparently not going to miss any bets.

Across a dozen feet of immaculate deck Maida's lovely eyes met mine in a look that caused my heart to turn over. Florida stirred restlessly beside me.

"A secret between you two, Maida?" she asked, challengingly.

"It might be," Maida said, deliberately.

Sleepy, who always saw what he looked at, grinned and turned to Florida.

"Garbo," he drawled, "let's you and me get drunk."

"An idea," Florida said, with a faint shrug.

She turned away with Sleepy and they went to the punch bowl. But I noticed she took only one glass, and did not empty that.

The bow of the *Adventurer* lifted slowly as we rounded the two-thousand-foot breakwater and headed south-by-west. There was a sound of squealing from the deckhouse. I strolled to the window and looked in. The other guests, Clyde Macklyn, Freda Carle and two or three more, were sitting on high stools at the half-moon of a bar, keeping a steward busy with their orders. Frida Carle had apparently tipped a cocktail into her lap with the first roll of the ship, and she was making a great to-do about it. They didn't even see me.

I moved to the port rail and looked at the slowly moving shoreline. Already, now that we had cleared land, I was feeling better. Sleepy was aboard, and my guests were a typical Hollywood group, most of whose interests were in keeping me alive—and working in pictures. Certainly none of those gaily laughing men and girls in the bar could be dangerous.

The sweet, salty air from the open reaches of the Pacific blew away my doubts, anxieties. The fight on the desert, and the house at Arrowhead where they had tried to douse me with acid, and the Hollywood house where an enemy threatened me by telephone—all these seemed millions of miles away. Amid these surroundings the warnings of the mysterious syndicate man seemed absurd. It was impossible that he should be among these few carefully selected guests. Perhaps I had fooled him by making it a small party and letting Maida make out the list of people to be invited. Of course there was always a chance that he might be among the crew, and of these the new captain, Dunkler, would be the best bet, but by watching him I could protect myself against surprise. And there was the possibility that the syndicate man might have slipped aboard during the day and stowed away somewhere. But even if he had, what could he accomplish on this yacht—and hope to get away after he had done it?

A quiet figure ranged up beside me at the rail. It was Erl Gorley. "A note," he said in a low voice. "I found it pinned to the pillow of your bed in the owner's suite. The envelope says 'Urgent'."

A queer chill ran through me as I took the envelope. A hunch, maybe. "I guess," I murmured, "that this will be it."

The envelope was the heavy linen paper and upon the flap were engraved two crossed burgees and the words: "Aboard Yacht *Adventurer*."

Within was a scrawled note written on stationery which matched the envelope.

> I promised you I would be aboard, and I never break a promise. Presently I will join you for our long-delayed conference.
>
> Your old and badly treated employer,
>
> The Chief.

Gone like a wisp of wind in a squall was my new-found sense of security. So he had actually come aboard, had he? Calmly he had taken this yacht stationery out of one of the guests' rooms, or perhaps out of a desk in the main saloon, and written me this warning. Why had he bothered and taken a chance of being discovered? Why hadn't he just waited his time and then jumped me at a favorable

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opportunity? He must have known that once I had read the note I would see to it he would get no opportunities at all.

I AM not afraid of many things, but I give you my word something like a thrill of fear ran through me as I stood staring down at that sinister message. But I took a long breath, steadied myself and looked around, trying to catch some furtive glance turned in my direction to watch my expression as I read the note.

But only Sleepy was looking at me. Over his cocktail glass and from beneath half-closed eyes he was watching me while he went right on kidding Florida, who was still sultrily eyeing Maida Watkins. The others were deep in some argument about color-pictures; I could have been in Zanzibar for all they were thinking about me at that moment.

Then, slowly, I became aware that one other was sharply interested in my reactions. Erl Gorley, inconspicuous as ever, had stepped back against the rail and was missing nothing of whatever I might be showing of my emotions. Sleepy's gaze shifted, struck full at Gorley. It moved Gorley quickly away from the rail; he marched forward to the deckhouse and entered, not looking back.

I took three champagne cocktails in a row, but although everybody else seemed to be feeling pretty good, mine had no bounce. I might as well have been drinking water. The gang came out of the bar and joined the little group around Maida. I sidestepped out of the crowd and got my back against the rail. Right now I did not care to have anybody standing behind me. Beyond the opposite rail I could see the towns of Manhattan Beach and Hermosa descending slowly below the level of the sea as the yacht cut an oblique course out into the Pacific. An impulse came to me to send orders to the captain to keep close to the coast line. But I dismissed the idea; if they wanted sea room for whatever they had in mind, let them have sea room and get the thing over with. It was the waiting that was so hard. If somebody had appeared on that brightly lighted deck brandishing a gun it would have been a relief. Sleepy and I could have gone into action and done something about it. Or at least we could have made a good try.

Sleepy eased over to me. He asked for a cigarette. Moving close to take it from the package, he drawled:

"It might help if I knew what was biting you. Or going to bite you. I always did hate shadow boxing."

I held a match for his cigarette. "I don't know myself," I said. "So far as I know now, they're just going to try to kill me."

"Jolly," he said, drily. "Who is?"

"I wish I knew," said I, devoutly.

FRIDA CARLE, young and slim and very gay, turned on a radio set which stood against the bulkhead of the deckhouse. Music came in as the tubes warmed up—supper dancing at the Coconut Grove. Instantly Maida's eyes called me. In a moment she was in my arms, warm and slender and fragrant. Sleepy marched over to Florida, put his arm around her waist and danced away with her. I noticed that they were never far from us although not once did Sleepy look at me. But Florida did and in her stormy gaze there was an unspoken reminder of all the things she knew and had not told—yet.

"Have you made arrangements for the plane, Dexter?" Maida asked in her low and vibrant voice.

My breath caught in my throat. "There's always a standby pilot at Burbank," I whispered. "I—I didn't want to take a chance of word leaking out that I was chartering a plane for Yuma."

I felt like a dog. Under what name would I marry this girl—who could have had almost any man in Hollywood? If I married her as Dexter Hathaway, the thing would not be legal. But as Jerry Banning, I'd have to tell her the truth before we climbed into the plane. It was nice, dancing with her She was as light as a snowflake and the persuasive fragrance of her hair came into my nostrils and made me a little dizzy. It occurred to me to take her

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to some quiet place on deck and tell her all about—everything. But I had signed a contract to tell nobody. . . .

The music died away. An announcer began reading news bulletins.

"A wireless message from the steamship *Murtine,* bound for Honolulu, reports the mysterious disappearance of a passenger named John Rogers," said the announcer. "It is reported that he either jumped or fell overboard last night. He was last seen on deck about midnight and when a cabin steward reported that his berth had not been slept in, a search was conducted aboard the steamer. Mr. Rogers was not found. Investigation of his belongings indicate that he was a man of mystery. More than nine thousand dollars was found in his suitcase, but nowhere was there any letter or memorandum giving the names of relatives or friends. Mr. Rogers was described as being about thirty years of age, with black hair, gray eyes and a powerful physique. Authorities at Honolulu are waiting the arrival of the *Murtine* to make a more complete investigation."

For a full half minute I stood stock still there, my hand on Maida's arm, staring at the instrument which was again playing soft dance music.

"What's the matter, Dex?" Maida asked, anxiously. "Don't you feel well?"

Out of the deckhouse door came Erl Gorley, trying not to walk too fast. There was a bright spot of color on each of his pallid cheeks and his eyes had a queer expression to them I had never seen before. He came straight over to me. "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Hathaway," he said, quietly, "but could I see you for a moment inside?"

"Okay," I said, my mind still awhirl with the news contained in that broadcast.

My face must have looked strange, for Maida was staring up at me. I could see Florida and Sleepy regarding me, too. I tried to grin convincingly. But what I wanted to do was to laugh out loud, for John Rogers was dead. And now there was no other Dexter Hathaway in all the world but me!

CHAPTER XVI

SOCK!

I FOLLOWED Erl Gorley through the magnificent lounge, paneled in butternut and furnished with deep chairs and divans, all in the modern manner. At the forward end of this big room was a stairway leading to the deck below. And immediately beneath the lounge was the owner's suite—*my* suite!—which extended the full width of the vessel. Behind me, as Gorley led me into the suite was a passageway extending forward to a blank wall which I assumed was the engine room bulkhead. To right and left of this passageway were the guests' cabins, eight or ten of them.

The room we entered was even more luxurious than the lounge. Erl Gorley whirled, closed the door behind him and locked it. He was in a state. His face was flushed and his eyes, which had always been icy blue, were almost black. "You heard that broadcast?"

"Yes, I heard it," I said, watching him.

"From now on, you're Dexter Hathaway, and there isn't any other!"

"It's a funny thing," I murmured, "but just a few minutes ago I was thinking practically that same thing."

"Not a soul in the world could ever prove that you weren't Hathaway himself. There isn't the tiniest bit of evidence in his trunks, or anywhere, to prove that he wasn't plain John Rogers."

"How could you be sure of that?"

"I saw to it," Gorley said.

"A thorough man, if I ever saw one. But don't you think his family should be notified?"

"He hasn't any family. Once I asked him where were all the brothers and cousins and aunts and kinfolk that always swarm around a star for support. He told me he hadn't a relative in the world. So there isn't a soul for him to leave his money to. He always said he was going to make a will so the state wouldn't get it all, but he never did."

"I'm getting the idea," I said, softly.

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A frown appeared between his close-set eyes. He was studying my face intently. When he spoke the breathles ness had gone out of his voice. Now it was steady and held the cutting edge of a honed blade.

"If we don't work together, Jerry," he said, laying flat emphasis on my own name as he used it for the first time in days, "it will leave you dangling at the end of a rope with a knot under your left ear."

"A murder charge, eh?" I said gently. "How come?"

I could see caution come and go in those button-shaped eyes of his. He was backing away from me an inch at a time and his tight hand was creeping carefully toward his right coat pocket.

"Never mind your gun, Gorley," I said. "I could wring your neck like a chicken's before you could get that gun to work. Unload what's on your mind."

HE LICKED his thin lips and pulled his hand away from his gun. "All right," he said, "but first let me tell you how you stand, according to the way the police might see it. You took Hathaway to Arrowhead and after that he was never seen again."

"And you were with me," I reminded him.

"I deny it," he said, evenly. "And where are the witnesses? The plastic surgeon was the only one—and he had an accident."

"So he did," I agreed, knowing definitely, now, that Gorley had done something to the doctor's car—murdering him as surely as if he had placed a gun to his temple. Was Gorley the Chief, I wondered swiftly? Well if he were, in a few minutes he would be as dead as the doctor. "All right," I said. "The doctor is dead. But Cliff Furber saw you, too, at the bottom of the mountain when we were going back to Hollywood."

"I came after you during the night," Erl Gorley said, smoothly. "He didn't see me come. He didn't see me all the days we were there. He just saw me go."

"Fair enough," I conceded dryly. "So where does that take us?"

"It takes us to this, as the police might see it: You killed Hathaway, probably at Arrowhead. Then you went back to Hollywood and impersonated him. You forged his name and made use of his money. His estate is pretty close to a million dollars. Men have been murdered for much less than that. You planned, before it was necessary for you to act in another picture—which would, of course, have showed you up—to retire from the pictures and live on Hathaway's fortune. Or, perhaps, to cash in and disappear."

"You forgot one thing," I said. "There was a contract."

He looked me square in the eye. "Can you show that contract?"

"So you *did* steal it. Gorley, I believe I'll give you the worst beating a man ever got—and lived through."

Once again he clutched at his side pocket. I reached out and grabbed his wrist. He cried out at the pressure of my hand.

"There are ways," I went on in a cold fury, "of making you confess your share of this. Not very pretty ways. But they are—efficient."

Blue veins stood out like worms under the white skin of his face. His eyes, black, now, in contrast with the premature whiteness of his hair, were desperate. "Whatever you make me say," he cried, "I'll deny later. And suppose they found me guilty of something? Would that pull you out of the jam?"

That was true. They would figure there had been two of us instead of just one. Gorley had done a fine job of framing me.

"All right," I said, letting his wrist drop, "what's your proposition?"

"The first thing," he said, "is to get safe ashore. I'm worried about the Chief."

"You think he's aboard?" I demanded.

"I don't know, but I think so," he said, unhappily. "They got an organization that's something! All right, you send word to the captain you don't feel well and want to get back to Santa Monica. Then we stay right in this room, the two of us, with the door locked and our guns in our hands,

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until we're docked and the guests ashore and we've got a clear road to the gangway."

"Then what?" I snapped.

"When we get back to the house, Dr. Flanders'll announce that you've had a relapse and will have to quit the films, probably permanently. Then we scram out of here. We go to Germany for the cure. There's ten Gs in the bank account you draw against. I've got Hathaway's power of attorney. I can cash in his entire fortune. Why let the state get it?"

"Go on," I said softly. "What then?"

"Once we get away from the syndicate, we'll be sitting pretty. Nobody in the world is forgotten faster than a retired actor. After people have forgotten you, we can get a plastic surgeon to change your face again and you can lead the life of Reilly on your half of about a million potatoes."

"My half?"

"We split, fifty-fifty."

"I see. What was the necessity of all these shennanigans, my doubling for Hathaway and all the rest of this when you could have robbed him with your power of attorney?"

"He was a coward," Gorley said with feeling. "He was afraid of the Chief. He'd have given away all his money if I hadn't got him away. He'd have paid it all out in blackmail to them."

"And you still tell me you don't know anything about that syndicate?"

His eyes shifted. "No," he said, and I knew he was lying.

"So you framed the whole racket?" I said.

"Yes. And Hathaway was delighted at the idea of getting away from the Chief—"

"Did he know who this Chief was?" I demanded.

"No, and that's what worried him. That's why he was glad to run away and let you take all the falls for him. He was so glad to be on the lam he was even willing for you to have Maida Watkins and Florida Craig! He didn't think you'd last very long anyway. He thought you would get killed."

IT WAS then that I hit him. A left uppercut to the jaw with one hundred and ninety pounds of bone and muscle behind it. I felt the jawbone give under my knuckles as his head snapped back. He struck the floor with the back of his head and his shoulders. The thick carpet cushioned his fall, but he didn't know it. He lay there, spread-eagled, his jaw twisted sidewise, his breath bubbling in and out. . .

I got his gun out of his side pocket and went out of the cabin.

And on the other side of the locked door was Sleepy Smith, leaning negligently against the bulkhead. He craned his neck and peered around the edge of the door to where Gorley's flaccid figure lay sprawled.

"Kill him?" Sleepy asked, gloomily.

"No, but for two cents I'd go back there and finish the job."

"I wouldn't," Sleepy said, calmly. "When he wakes up, we'll have a party. After a couple of—treatments, he'll just crave to tell us the whole story, and in front of witnesses."

"So you heard our little conversation, did you?" I asked.

"I heard enough," Sleepy admitted, without pleasure. "I figured if you didn't want me sticking around you wouldn't have invited me aboard."

"Well, what do you think about it."

Sleepy rolled a disapproving eye at me. "The jams you can get into!" he groaned. "Well, I'll send you cakes and cookies. They say the grub at St. Quentin is terrible!"

That was about four o'clock. It was a little after eight when the Chief struck.

CHAPTER XVII

LIGHTS OUT

WE WERE sitting on stools at the bar. I was feeling pretty good. I was beginning to think that maybe the Chief had missed the boat. But just to be on the safe side I had eased away from the milling crew on the afterdeck where, on

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account of the way the champagne cocktails had been flying, there was a lot of confused moving around. I wanted to be where I could see people as they moved up on me.

I was sitting between Maida and Cliff Furber. Florida and Sleepy were on the other side of Maida. I could see what was going on behind me in the mirror across the bar. I could even see the door leading out onto the afterdeck, where the crowd was. So I felt all right. All right, that was, except for the fact that Sleepy and Florida and Cliff Furber had all stuck around as close as wet paint all evening, so there hadn't been a chance to talk to Maida about anything that really mattered —such as Yuma, for instance.

Oh, I knew why they were sticking around. Cliff Furber, in his smiling way, wanted to make sure that I didn't get too much time alone with Maida. And Florida hung close by for exactly the same reason; through honeyed smiles the two girls were putting the blast on one another. And Sleepy, of course, was keeping an eye upon me for reasons which I knew as well as he.

It is strange, the things you remember. There was an electric clock over the mirror. The kind that has a hand which jumps forward, minute by minute. As I sipped my cocktail I watched that hand jerk forward toward eight o'clock, not realizing that when it made its last little forward hitch to the exact dot of eight, things would blow up smack in my face.

A six minutes to eight Sleepy, with a warning wink to me through the mirror, had gone down to have a look at Gorley. He did not tell me why he had gone, but he and I had been around so long together that when he winked and eased out of there, I knew immediately why he had gone and that I was to watch my own back until he returned. He returned at exactly two minutes to eight. I know because I happened to be looking at the clock when he slid upon his stool. He looked at me through the mirror and grinned.

"I guess," he said with an elaborate careless air, "that Gorley doesn't feel very well. He was in your cabin, remember? I was just down there. He's gone. The steward says he hurt his face, or something, and is lying down in his own cabin."

At this Florida turned and looked steadily at me. I fooled with my cocktail, not wanting to meet her level gaze. She had a way of seeing too much, of understanding too much—this girl had.

"I suppose," she murmured, "he walked into a door?"

"Might have." I shrugged, passing my glass to the steward.

I noticed with only half a mind that the steward did not immediately begin working on my cocktail. Instead, he hesitated and glanced at the clock. The hand was at exactly one minute to eight. It did not seem important, then, that he looked from the minute hand of the clock to Cliff Furber. He reached for a piece of ice, and the ice compartment of the bar was directly in front of me. I remember that now, but at the moment it did not seem important.

Then Cliff Furber spoke, and an electric shock ran the full length of my spine, exploding in my brain. "Is there any hope," Cliff Furber said in a completely new, utterly hard, voice, "that Erl Gorley has broken his neck?"

I happened to be looking at the electric clock as this new voice of his cut through the silence of that room. And I saw the hand jerk ahead to exactly eight o'clock.

AND as if the echo of Furber's voice had actuated some relay switch to break a circuit, every light on the yacht blinked out. The girls squealed nervously, as they always do at a time like that. Or, at least, Maida did. I didn't hear Florida squeal.

Through that split second of waiting Sleepy's voice came to me in a queer sort of sigh.

"Brace yourself, big boy. Swing it!"

My hand was darting inside my coat, reaching for the holstered gun. And that new voice of Furber's brought everything back now. I was pushing my feet hard

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against the chromium rail of the bar, trying, as I pulled my gun, to get around to face Furber. And with a dull feeling of hopelessness I knew that I was too late.

From the other side of the bar the steward's hand reached out through the darkness. It touched my shoulder gently, but I jumped as if a snake had struck me. Swifly the hand touched my head. I had my gun now, but what to do with it in that inky blackness?

I heard a very faint *whish* as something —a blackjack, I guess—whispered down through the darkness before me. My brain seemed to explode. I felt myself being pulled by that hand. Pulled toward the bar. My face hit the polished mahogany surface. But it didn't hurt. Nothing hurt. I just felt numb.

And out of immeasurable distance I heard Cliff Furber's voice, very calm, very polite, saying:

"Dexter, let's go out on deck. At least there's moonlight out there."

That was all. His voice—everything—was drowned in the tidal wave of blackness that swept over my world. . . .

THE next impression I had was of drowning. Water was sluicing into my eyes, up my nostrils and down my throat. I groaned, gagged and tried to beat the stream away with my two fists.

A pleasant voice—a remembered voice —said: "Karl, that will do. He's coming out of it."

Another stream of water caught me just as I was trying to drag in a strangled breath of air. And a vicious snarl came to my ears:

"I like doing this, Chief, he hates it so!"

Chief! So the man hadn't missed the boat! Cliff Furber's answering voice took on depth and hardness.

"Did you hear me, Karl?" it cracked. "I said that would be enough."

No more water sluiced down into my upturned face. And after a while I could see. The brilliantly lighted room swam before me. There was a humming in my ears which, for some moments, I could not identify. Then I discovered I was lying on a grating in the engineroom and the humming was from a small generator in the corner. The twin Diesels which drove the propellers through reduction gears were silent. I wondered why the yacht was not underweigh, but I didn't work up a worry about it. There were too many other things on my mind.

With an effort I moved my pain-blurred eyes down to the little semicircle of men who stood around me under the unshaded electrics. There was Clifford Furber, with his pleasant, likeable smile. The big man with the dripping water ladle had his right arm in a sling. He was the one Furber had called Karl; instantly I recognized him as the plug-ugly who had sicked the acid-throwers on me that night at Arrowhead, and that broken arm was my handiwork. I had bent it almost double across the window sill of his overturned car out in the desert. Another of the downturned faces was that of the bar steward who had clipped me when the lights had been turned out. And the fourth—my heart missed a beat when my eyes found him. It was, of all people, Pete, the lug whose face I had splashed with his own nitric acid in the mountain-cottage. I knew this by his bandages which covered his entire face from the nose down. Over his mouth was a loose square of gauze which flapped in and out as he breathed.

"Old home week," I said. And then, looking at Cliff Furber: "There's nothing like a real friend, is there, Cliff?"

"Who would know better than you, Gene?" Furber said, softly.

"Gene?" I echoed.

"Do you still insist upon being called Hathaway?" Furber asked, wearily. "We'd all rather call you by your old name, Gene Selick."

I lay back with my aching head pressed against the hard edges of the grating, trying to figure things out. Jerry Banning, Dexter Hathaway, and now Gene Selick. Too many names. They confused me. Where, I wondered dismally, was Sleepy? And where were Florida, and Maida?"

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"Let's get it over with, Chief," Karl said.

"Gene," said Cliff Furber, "or let's call you Hathaway, since you seem to prefer it, the time has come to get rid of you. You have somehow managed to gather enough courage to become a nuisance. And you have broken every promise you made to us. Do you remember when you were a two-bit marijuana peddler, growing the weed in vacant lots and backyards, making it into cigarettes and selling them at twenty-five cents apiece, how you saw the possibilities in expanding the business and making what you thought was real money out of it?"

I didn't bother to answer. I was trying to figure out whether it was worth while to tell him that I was neither Gene Selick nor Dexter Hathaway. So Hathaway was —or had been—a seller of marijuana? No wonder he wanted to run away from his past! But Cliff Furber's voice went relentlessly on.

"You remember you went to that crook lawyer, Leiber, to get capital? Well, I got into the thing with the understanding that I should never be known by any of the syndicate, that I should be undisputed chief, and that I should get an extra ten percent of the profits. Hathaway, you were a rat then. It was you who first thought of selling the reefers to school children. But you had brains, I'll say that for you. It was you who decided that Hollywood was a fertile field for our efforts, and you came out to organize this territory, which has since become so profitable. You—"

"Chief, do we have to stand here talking?" Karl said restlessly. "I want to go to work on him."

And to emphasize his desire he sent a kick crashing into my ribs that made my whole body rock with the force of the blow.

"Wait, Karl," Furber said. "When Zarbish, that director, saw you and gave you your start in the pictures, you first thought that it was just an entrée to the studios where you would get acquainted with many new customers. Remember, when you found you had the makings of a star how you sent word to me—whom you didn't know by sight—through the lawyer that if we would let you continue as an actor you would gladly contribute half your earnings to the syndicate? Instead, you doublecrossed us and even made one effort to tip the police off to us. That was the night we caught you at Malibu and gave you a beating. I was the man in the black mask—your old friend Cliff Furber!"

A METALLIC voice blared into the relative quiet of the engine room. "Bridge speaking," it said. "I'm sending Gorley to you. His jaw is broken. How much longer will you be?"

Furber stepped to the annunciator. "Five more minutes, Captain. Have you sighted the speedboat yet?"

"No, sir. But we're at the rendezvous now. It should be here at any minute. I'd better tell you, sir, that the passengers are beginning to get upset. They want to know where you and the owner and Mr. Smith are."

"You haven't found Smith yet?" Furber asked sharply.

I held my breath, listening.

"Not yet, sir, but we will find him unless he jumped overboard when the light switch was pulled."

Just as Furber turned away from the annunciator, a steel door opened. A sailor pushed Erl Gorley into the engineroom and slammed the door behind him. Gorley was a sight. His mouth was dribbling blood and his chin was all askew. He seemed to be trying to hold his jaw in place with his left hand while he reached for the grab rail with the other. His staring eyes found me, then darted across the hostile faces of my captors. They finally came to rest upon Furber, who stood there watching him and not saying a word. Through the humming of the generator I could hear Gorley's gasp of fear.

"Are you—are you the Chief?"

"I am," Furber said. "And you are the rat who doublecrossed us by stealing the second twenty-five grand payment he made to us." Furber looked at me. "I know you

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are a liar, Hathaway, but you did tell me the truth when you said you put the money in the suitcase last month. But Gorley didn't deliver it to that place in the desert. He stole it on the way out. And then he told you we were lying when we said we didn't get it, but got waste paper instead. We learned at the bank you drew out the money in the denominations we asked for.

"I—I didn't—"

"Shut up!" The bar steward and Pete moved quietly toward Gorley, who pressed back against the bulkhead. But Furber looked at me.

"Dexter," he said, "in a few minutes I'm going to be back on deck with Maida, wondering where in the world you have gone. A speedboat will soon pull up alongside and four—ah, ruffians—will rush out of the engineroom, embark in it and be sped back to shore. When two bodies, yours and Gorley's, are presently discovered here I shall grieve more loudly than any of the rest. I shall send more expensive flowers to your funeral than anyone in Hollywood, and all the time I shall be hoping that your doublecrossing soul is blazing in hell. Karl—"

And at that exact moment the engineroom door opened. Sleepy Smith strolled into the room.

"Well, well," he murmured over the soft song of the generator, "isn't this a happy little gathering? Mind if I join you?"

He took three or four steps, coming to a halt just above the starboard Diesel. Behind him the steel door had been left open. And before that terrible silence ended, a tall, slim figure was framed in the doorway. Florida.

Then, deliberately, she stepped into that supercharged room.

"FLORIDA!" Sleepy roared. "Get out of here!" Florida did not move. She was looking at Furber and her almond-shaped eyes were contemptuous.

"I've always wondered about you, Cliff," she said.

Furber smiled. "I shall really regret to be forced to kill four people instead of two," he said, slowly, "but after all, I have my own life to lead, and I intend to lead it."

The moment had come. I swiveled my body to one side, made a desperate lunge toward Furber's leg. And missed. Furber's gun appeared in his hand as if by magic and began to swing down on me.

But at my very first movement Gorley, like a cornered rat, pushed himself away from the wall and began to plunge across the greasy flooring toward Furber. Furber saw him coming and forgot me for the moment. He lifted his arm, covered Gorley and began to throw shots, one after another, straight into Gorley's belly.

I was on my hands and knees by the time he had pulled the trigger for the fourth time. Through the bouncing echoes of gun shots I heard the tinny voice of the annunciator.

"Bridge calling! What's the matter—"

And then another gun spoke. And I was lunging forward toward Furber's legs with my arms widespread. My shoulder hit his thighs, my arms gathered his legs in. He came down with a crash. The whole engine room was now reverberating to the explosive barking of guns. We were down, Furber and I, and the sharp edges of those gratings were knifing into us as we tried to get to our feet. Over and over, we rolled toward the edge of that platform where there was a twelve-foot drop to the engine pits below.

Somehow I caught a single glimpse of the chaos around me. I saw Sleepy's gangling figure bent slightly with his spitting gun cuddled in the curve of his stomach. His lips were back in a grin and his eyes had narrowed to two tight little slits. Erl Gorley was laying on the grating, his mouth stretched wide, as if he were screaming. If he was, I have no memory of hearing it. Florida, leaping for the arm of a man who was pointing an automatic directly at Sleepy's left ear. The bandaged man Pete, his eyes crazy with hatred, reaching down for me as for that single moment I was on top of Furber—and falling off Furber's squirming body.

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We were now on the exact edge of the grating, but I didn't know it. I was on my back and Furber, on top of me, was clawing for my throat with one hand and bringing his gun around with the other. Above him, Pete was frantically trying to kick me.

A gun roared close by. Something wet and sticky splashed down over me and Pete fell flopping over both Furber and me. It flattened Furber down, threw him off balance. I rolled. Both bodies slowly slipped off mine. Both slid off the edge of that grating and fell with a crash to the engine pit, a dozen feet below. I was on my feet, staring down at them, oblivious to the uproar that was going on beside me, around me.

PETE was a sprawled figure in that narrow passageway between the two hulking Diesels. Furber was pushing himself to his hands and knees, then dragging himself upright. He still had his gun, and he could still use it. Steadying himself on his knees, he began to pull that gun up to cover me.

I jumped. With both feet aimed at him I went down through those twelve feet of heated air. He saw me coming. He wavered, tried to sidestep. One of my heels found his shoulder, the other his chest and we crashed to the deck. I felt—and I think I heard—his ribs snap as my one hundred and ninety odd pounds drove into him. I heard his breath go out of him in one explosive sob. And when I pushed myself off him, there was no tightness to his muscles.

Above me there was still chaos. Feet rang on the steel grating. At my feet Furber was very quiet. His arm moved a little as he tried to twist his wrist upward and cover me with the gun which he still held gripped in his right hand. I stamped on that hand and kicked the gun out of the crushed fingers. He paid no more attention to me. He turned his face away with an effort and wearily spat blood on the oil-filmed deck-plates.

I turned away from him, stepped back, took two quick steps and leaped for the gratings above. I caught the edge with my hands, pulled myself up and over like a snake. And I was just in time to see Karl die.

Florida had swooped upon a gun which lay on the gratings. Sleepy lay quietly on the floor, not moving, and over him stood Karl, a smoking gun in his one good hand, just tightening his finger on the trigger for another shot. But he never got in that last shot. Florida, coming up from her stooping position, fired while her arm was still swinging. Her aim wasn't too good, but it was good enough. The slug caught Karl in the throat. It spun him around in a full turn. He toppled, fell heavily.

I remembered there was one more of them. The bar steward. But there was no more fight left in him. He was backed up against the bulkhead, arms lifted high over his head and he was squalling for mercy like a spanked baby.

I went on my knees beside Sleepy. Florida was already bending over him on the other side. There was a great splotch of blood on Sleepy's coat. If Sleepy was dead, I told myself with wicked anger, I'd run amuck in this ship, finding the captain and any other crooks in the crew and shoot them down, one by one. It didn't occur to me to wonder how I could know who were crooks and who were not.

"Sleepy!" I cried, ripping at his coat with fumbling fingers. His shirt was clinging wetly to his lean ribs. I yanked it away.

He looked up at me and grinned feebly.

Now I could see the wound. At first glance my heart came up and choked me. I heard the quickly indrawn hiss of Florida's breath. The bullet had hit him on the left side, just over the heart. It was a big ragged tear. I swabbed the blood off and had a look. Then I took in a big sob of relief. The slug had hit a rib and slanted off—and out. Two weeks in the hospital and Sleepy would be getting drunk and fighting and raising hell again.

"It knocked me over," Sleepy said apologetically, "and I cracked my head on this damned floor." He tried to get up.

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"Lie still!" I shouted at him. "One move and I'll kick your ears off!"

"Are you crazy?" Florida stormed at me. "Can't you see he's dying?"

"You can't kill a guy like that." I snapped. I turned away then, because she was bending over and kissing him full on the lips. A few hours ago she had never talked to him in her life.

CHAPTER XVIII

FADEOUT

THERE was a great clamor in the corridor outside. The door swung open with a clang. The captain burst into the engineroom. A seaman came in with him. And just behind him—strange figures amid this shambles—were Moe Block and Ansel Bittner—and Maida.

"Captain," I said, swinging my gun on him, "reach high. You, too, you with the gob's suit on. Quick—"

The captain stared hard at me and then lifted his arms toward the deck beams overhead.

"Dexter!" Maida cried, and shouldered her way past Ansel Bittner.

"Wait a minute, Maida! Captain, how many other men are in this thing? Talk fast and tell the truth!"

The captain's eyes took in the shambles. He took a careful step to one side and peered down into the engine pit, where Pete and Clifford Furber were sprawled in their own blood.

"I figured something like this would happen," he said into the silence. "But Furber had too much on me. I'm glad he's dead. I wish I had killed him myself."

"So do I," I said, grimly. "How many others are in this?"

"Just us here," the captain said. "And two men coming out in a speedboat. They figured on taking us all ashore."

"Is the mate capable of taking this vessel back to Santa Monica?" I demanded.

"Yes, sir," the captain said wearily.

"Tell him to do it then. Tell him through the annunciator. Where are the engineers?"

"Locked in their cabins, sir."

"Get them out."

He walked over to the annunciator. "Bridge!" he called. "Captain speaking. Tell the mate to take charge and to head the ship back to port." He turned his dispirited eyes toward me. "What about the speedboat, sir? It'll be out here, looking for us."

"Let 'em look," I snapped. "Come on with me, you birds, and we'll get the engineers back on the job. Walk easy, all three of you, because I'd just as soon shoot any of you—or all of you—as not."

Moe Block and Ansel Bittner were still standing in the doorway, their eyes wide, their jaws hanging open. They were staring at me as if they had never seen me—or Dexter Hathaway—in their lives before. Maida was standing directly in front of me and in her level eyes was an expression that made my heart miss a dozen beats. She put out her hands to touch my blood-soaked sleeve, but I stopped her with a shake of my aching head.

"Wait, Maida," I said. "There'll be something I have to tell you first. I'll see all of you on the afterdeck when we get the ship underweigh. Moe, Ansel, will you carry Sleepy up? Lay him out on the divan up there. I'll want to tell him, too."

As I herded the three conspirators out, the others, Maida and Florida and the men looked at me with somnambulistic stares. Sleepy's eyes glinted with amusement as he said:

"Out on the dock I said it, remember? You're up to your old tricks, you fighting fool!"

IT IS not easy to explain things reasonably when your blood still runs wild with violence, especially when there is nothing reasonable about the thing you are trying to explain.

The *Adventurer* was plowing swiftly through the night, heading back toward Santa Monica—and reality. And I, standing on the afterdeck, was heading back toward the life of a professional stunt man—and a couple of hundred dollars a week

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when the weeks happened to be good.

They were all sitting there, thirteen out of the fourteen guests who had so gaily embarked on this floating cocktail-party which was to have such a fantastic end. The fourteenth was dead in a cabin, and the world was a lot better off without him.

Sleepy, whose torn side had been deftly bandaged by Florida, was lying at ease on a leather divan, sipping contentedly at a highball which was nine-tenths Scotch, one-tenth water. Florida was sitting at his feet and from time to time she looked at him with an expression which told me all too clearly that Sleepy's luck was in. Maida was sitting between Moe Block and Ansel Bittner. Her face was very white but her eyes were unflinching as I stood before them and told them everything that had happened since Erl Gorley found me at the Knickerbocker Bar and got me started on this fantastic job of doubling for Dexter Hathaway.

I told them *everything.* I told them about Gorley's planning the whole thing and about the contract I had signed and of the proposition Gorley had made me just before I broke his jaw.

Two or three times Moe Block excitedly tried to crash into my story with questions, but I shut him up. When I told of the real Dexter Hathaway's murder—or suicide—on the *Murtine,* Ansel Bittner closed his eyes and stared steadily down at the deck, but said not a word. The others listened in breathless silence until I had come to the bitter, savage end. Nobody said a word while I went into the bar, poured myself an immense slug of liquor and downed it at a gulp. They just sat there, considering what I had said, each as it applied to his or her own life.

It seemed a very long time before Moe Block spoke up. "Even us who made money on him knew Dexter Hathaway was a no-good."

Maida Watkins put her hand to her face, covering her eyes. Florida just looked at me, but her mouth was very tight.

Ansel Bittner sighed heavily. "Ain't it a pity he couldn't've been more like this guy who doubled for him—like this guy here—this Banning."

Moe Block started. He stared hard at Bittner, then he looked at me as if he were studying the very bones and muscles and nerve trunks under my skin. A thin smile touched his lips.

"Ansel," he said in a wondering voice, "for an agent, you actually got brains!" He jumped up out of his chair, began to pace excitedly up and down the deck. "A screen test would prove it," he said to himself. "I remember some of them stunt pictures. Good, they were." The others were watching him with astonishment. He spun around and faced them all, his small, dark face alight. One at a time he looked at them. "Not one of us here but had some kind of a stake in Dexter Hathaway," he said, slowly. "Some of us made money off his pictures. We're all in the film business and anything that makes it look bad before the public hurts every one of us. If it comes out that Hathaway was a hophead and a dope-peddler . . ." His voice trailed off.

There was a quiet murmur of agreement from those who sat in a big semicircle around me.

"Me, I see something in this guy Jerry Banning I never saw in Dexter Hathaway. He's got Dexter's looks, and a lot of his mannerisms. But what I see in this guy is he's got stuff—and if I know anything about pictures, that'll show on the screen! I don't know can this guy act. If he can't, I can teach him, maybe. If I can't teach him, I swallow my loss and say nothing because I don't want the industry should be smeared with that other lug's dirt."

ANSEL BITTNER sat bolt upright and began to study me as Moe Block had studied me, appraisingly, and with the eye of one who knew screen values.

"You got something there, Moe."

"Look," said Moe, earnestly, "I got a proposition to make you boys and girls. The cops got to know about this schemozzle on this yacht. But it's a mutiny, or a hold-up, or something. Let them figure it out themselves. From this night on, this

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mug here is Dexter Hathaway, and if he can't act, he can retire. I start him in at a grand a week and I take test shots to find out can he act with Watkins, here, in *Hearts Aflame*. Who's got any objections?"

"I have!" I said, grimly. "After knowing what I know about Hathaway do you think I'd use his money and his house and his possessions even if the law would let me do it?"

"It's like Erl Gorley said," Ansel Bittner spoke up. "The man hadn't a relative in the world, nobody to leave his money to. By this time tomorrow night I'll give you a list of charities you can turn over everything he owns to—and if that wouldn't do a lot to wipe out the man's sins, what would? Who would lose? Certainly not you, Mr. Banning."

"That's it," said the producer, instantly. "Banning, here, starts all over again. The only thing he doesn't give to charity is Hathaway's name. That and Hathaway's looks. Hathaway was a stage name anyway. I give this guy a new contract and if he can act, he's sitting pretty. If he can't, he's out."

"This can't be done unless you all give it your nod." Moe went on. They all started talking at once. Except Maida who didn't say a word. Maida sat looking down at her hands.

I walked away and left them there. I walked through the bar, helping myself to another drink as I went forward. I walked through the smoking room and the lounge and the dining salon, finally coming out at the break of the deck forward. I put both elbows on the rail and looked out across the bow toward the dark and ragged coast of California, pin-pricked by low lights along the shore. It was all crazy to me. The only good thing about it was giving all these possessions of Hathaway's away to charity—to children's homes, and places for the aged, and things like that.

I had no special desire to become a picture star, even taking for granted I could act. All I wanted was to make a living. I had no pride about taking a man's name after the man was dead. What difference did it make what name I lived under the rest of my life?

I was sick of the whole thing. But if it all hadn't happened, I'd never have met Florida, never have met Maida. And then I wouldn't have had to tell myself how glad I was that Sleepy was sitting on top of the world with a girl like Florida, who would understand him, whose spirit was as gallant as his. Yes, Sleepy's luck was in.

But my luck was not in. I had had a single quick glimpse into the riches that might have been mine—into the look in Maida's eyes when she told me that if I wanted to fly to Yuma tonight, she would go.

Suddenly all my nerves came to attention. I straightened up at the rail and spun around. It was Maida coming out of the deckhouse door. For a while she didn't say anything. She just stood beside me, looking ahead toward the lifting lights ashore.

"You'll do well in pictures," she said in a faraway voice. "But if you don't, it won't matter. Any time you say, 'Let's quit pictures and go away somewhere,' it'll be quite all right with me." She slid her small hand under my arm and held it tightly. "Listen, Jerry, I liked Dexter Hathaway sometimes, and sometimes I didn't. But I never would have married him in a million years. It was the quality in you that Moe and the rest recognized that made me realize I loved—not the Dexter that had been, but the Dexter that was then—and that was you, Jerry. Would you still be interested in taking that plane for Yuma tonight?"

And as I pulled her into my arms I knew that everything would be all right. For Florida and Sleepy and for Maida and myself. I could always make a living. I might not like being an actor—but I could always fly, and with Maida to work for—Well, after all, how much does a man demand of life? Kissing Maida's sweet lips, I knew I had everything now.

THE END

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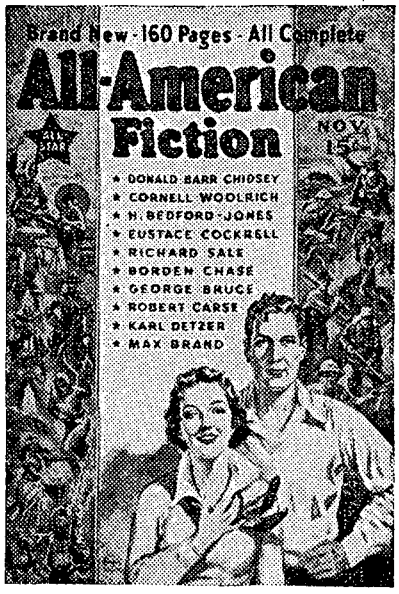

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Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

ALL week our office has echoed with the loud and purposeful stride of the postman. Not stayed by rain nor snow nor gloom of night, he has staggered in daily with our mail, bent on the swift completion of his appointed rounds—just like it says up over the New York Post Office. But he has also been bent a little by the quantity of our mail (the quality is an entirely different matter), and his appointed rounds have begun to resemble the last round of a very tired old prize fighter. We, however, are an inveterate letter-reader and the sight of a large mailbag approaching fills us with the same giddy pleasure that we used to feel out in grandpa's pasture when a bull called Abdul, who hated our looks, used to advance on us with the speed and precision of the 20th Century Limited passing through Four Corners. To escape Abdul we used to take a deep breath and dive through the fence, but we have given up taking deep breaths lately because you get so much more carbon monoxide that way. Today, we will merely leap the white picket fence that surrounds our office, fall on the mail and toss the letters up helter-skelter, letting them fall, with a dull sickening thud, where they may.

ROBERT O'REILLY

For over eight years, I have been a reader of your magazine, ARGOSY. Needless to say, it has been a favorite of mine for a long time. In fact, a week seems like a long time when I'm waiting for the next issue to appear on the stands. And, try as I may, I can't find another magazine to take its place. You see, I've usually read each Tuesday's ARGOSY completely through, by the time the wife calls me to dinner.

However, I've a few remarks to make concerning the present magazine.

I'd like to reiterate what one gentleman mentioned recently in a letter published in *Argonotes*. It seems to me that ARGOSY is on a higher level than most of the pulp magazines and it is a shame that the red band which distinguished the ARGOSY in time past, from the rest of the action fiction, has been dropped. I suppose that the reason for the change was a good one, but to my mind, not quite good enough, Some say "all change is progress", but that sounds a little too cocksure to me. As far as I know, there is no other action-weekly that was so distinguished, and the small extra cost for red ink and lithography which may or may not have been saved by the change, appears to me to be negligible when one considers how that red band did attract the eye to the fact that ARGOSY was different.

Someone said "let's shellac the '*Men of Daring*' feature and run a contributive column of some kind or other." I say, "Nuts to you, Mister. We like it too well."

And about serials; I believe quite sincerely in the present policy of three serials. They are really the best-selling point of the magazine and, provided they're well done, key the readers' interest more than any other possible means.

I agree also with someone who asked for at least one pseudo-scientific story every month or so. Such stories might possibly be holdovers from the Jules Verne and Victor Hugo of our childhood, but they make wonderful relaxation.

Most of the short stories you publish are very good, but I never read them unless I am forced to do so. They're so disappointing in that when you settle yourself nicely for a few minutes' enjoyment, and you flip over the next page, you've practically swallowed it whole in one gulp. Reminds me of those "Reading Time: 1 minute 23 seconds" masterpieces that clutter up a current weekly.

Rochester, N. Y.

WE needed a tonic like Mr. O'Reilly's genial letter to brace us for the one below. We don't often receive letters from women, but when we do we always have cause to remember them. Opening an envelope addressed in the firm calligraphy of the female is usually enough to destroy all that romantic nonsense that springs ever-hopeful in our breast. Reading the letter

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of a woman, man realizes that he is, after all, only a male, a vague shambling mistake. A woman with *mal de mer* comes right out and says so. Romantic, fumbling man just grows green and faints.

MRS. FRANK H. NORTHRUP

As I am fond of adventure and detective stories I often buy your magazines, although I think Detective Stories has deteriorated a good deal in the past year. It has also contained a good many grammatical mistakes and incorrect use of words when the writer (not the characters) is speaking.

Bedford Jones, Tuttle and Hulbert Footner are fine writers, but the only good new one you have is Blochman. Please have more of his. I like most of Brand's too. One writer I wish you would omit is Frederick Painton. His first novelette, "Guns Over Gibraltar", was a straight piece of untruthful propaganda on behalf of the Spanish Reds (who call themselves Loyalists). His two short stories printed afterwards revealed a most unclean mind. He revels in what makes decent people sick. I had some one cut his last novelette out of the magazine before I opened it for fear my eye might catch something that would make me sea sick.

And speaking of nausea, can't you persuade your writers to put in a little less of it? Some of your stories have it in every column. It may entertain gross minded people of a low type. Foreigners of that class enjoy it, but surely you have many nice readers who are offended by it.

If you print this letter—which you probably won't, please do not print my address.

(*Request complied with.*)

BELOW is an exhaustive but pleasant commentary on what makes Argosy tick. We like it, being especially fond of Point the Second which we read over from time to time, basking in the knowledge that there is a certain Mr. Burton out in Wheatland, Iowa, who understands us.

PERRY T. BURTON

Enjoying the aftermath of an operation, just a-reading my latest copy of the ARGOSY, I'm finally responding to a long-time urge to write you and tell you just what I think of this mag which I have religiously read for I don't know how long now. So I have dug up my old battleship Oliver—and here's my impressions of the ARGOSY, its editor, its writers—and SOME of its readers.

First—the mag. What do I cough up a thin dime for every week, grabbing it off hot from the newsstand—the mag, I mean, not the dime—if each new issue didn't intrigue me with its possible contents? What do I expect for that little dime—a dollar's worth of best fiction in every copy? I'm Scotch all right, but not to that extent. I've got but one rule for reading Argosy—"Kiver-to-kiver."

Second—the editor. When he dies I know he's going to heaven. He's had plenty of hell right here—besides, why should he have to further associate with all his critics when all us guys who are satisfied make so much better company? And if any man should be rewarded for his labors 'tis the editor who spends his life trying to please the greatest majority. So, a halo and harp for you, dear Ed.

Third—the writers. I have nothing except praise for ARGOSY's writers, one and all.

Fourth—the readers. Here's where my only criticism of ARGOSY comes in. Why argue with half-baked critics who spend their time hunting for small discrepancies made by writers of "fiction"? Any guy so exacting should write his own stories—and then be compelled to read them. Besides, there are hundreds of other fiction magazines on the market. Why doesn't he just buy one of those? I do admire the ARGOSY editor for publishing their yips and yowls in *Argonotes*—and I read 'em—always curiously sympathetic with anyone who has a sour stomach, and amused when they keep on eating the same diet.

Wheatland, Iowa.

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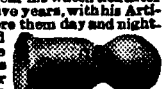

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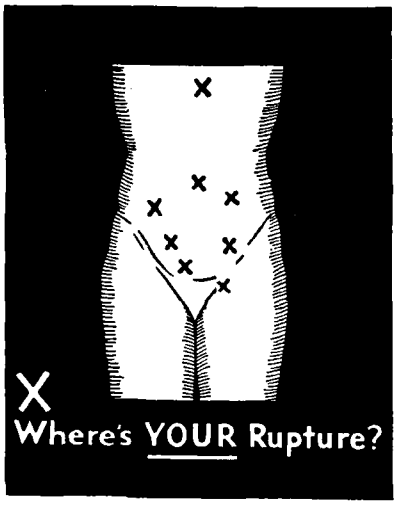

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